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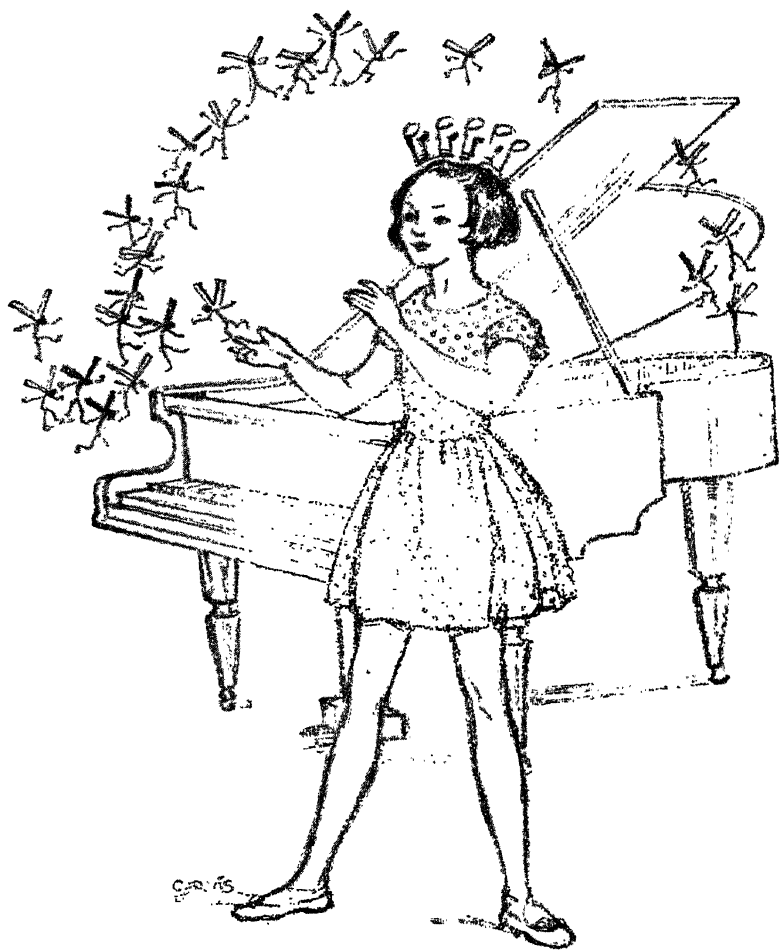
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Five-and-thirty black slaves,  
Half-a-hundred white,  
All their duty but to sing  
For their Queen's delight.

WILLIAM WATSON.

KITTY BARNE

# SHE SHALL HAVE MUSIC

*Illustrated by*  
RUTH GERVIS

'Rings on her Fingers,  
And bells on her Toes,  
She shall have Music,  
Wherever she goes.'

*Nursery Rhyme*



DENT

PENNANT BOOKS



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Made in Great Britain  
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Aldine Press · Letchworth · Herts  
for  
J. M. DENT & SONS LTD  
Aldine House · Bedford Street · London  
First published 1938  
Reprinted 1939, 1941, 1946, 1947, 1953, 1956, 1959  
First published in this edition 1962

FOR  
DAYME  
(Emily Daymond)



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## CHAPTER I

### CHANGING HOMES

THE Forrest family had had a horrible crossing from Belfast to Liverpool. Now they were sitting round the table of an hotel having breakfast, or making a pretence of it, before catching their connection to Bristol.

Ralph and Judith, twins and the eldest of the family, were trying not to be patronizing. They were feeling as fresh as paint after eight hours of sound sleep, whereas the others still seemed paralysed by the awful night they had endured.

'It *is* funny that Ralph and I should be such good sailors,' said Judy, and added in polite pity: 'It must have been dreadful for you all.'

'It was,' said her mother.

Ralph took it up.

'Pretty well every one sick as cats. The steward said so. Practically every soul on board but Ju and me. You were ill, mum, Meg was ill, Karen was ill, Biddy was frightfully ill——'

'Whisht now, and come down off them stepping stones,' said Biddy, in a dark, annoyed voice. It had been, as she kept on saying, a heart-scald to leave Ireland at all, let alone half dying on the boat.

'Quite right, Biddy,' said Mrs Forrest. 'He's being superior.'

'Sorry,' said Ralph cheerfully; 'I just thought you'd

like to know.' And then he made the sufferers shudder by saying: 'I say, could I have a kipper, d' you think? They 're on the list of things to eat.'

They had never had a meal in an hotel before and he meant to make the most of it.

'Yes. Do let 's. I smell them,' cried Judy.

'Well, if you do you must go to another table,' said their mother. 'Karen will only be sick again.'

Karen, the youngest of the family, drooping over her bowl of bread and milk, heard their voices in a dream—a nightmare dream of leaving Glenamoyle, travelling for hours and hours in a train, getting on the boat half asleep, to be dragged off it again next morning after what she imagined must have been an illness.

'She does look a bit off,' agreed Ralph. 'Right. Ju and I'll have boiled eggs, though it 's a bit of a waste. But I tell you what, Ju, let 's do a bunk after breakfast and go and have a look at the tunnel.'

'What tunnel 's that?' asked Biddy, with a flicker of interest.

'It 's the Mersey tunnel. Made of black glass.'

'Black *glass*?'

Meg lifted placid inquiring eyes.

'*Black* glass?'

Even Karen roused herself for a moment to hear what this marvel could be.

'Well, lined with black glass, anyway,' said Ralph airily. 'Man on the boat told me.'

'We can't go looking for tunnels now,' said Mrs Forrest decidedly. 'Not possibly.'

'Not all of us I didn't mean,' said Ralph. 'Judy and I can go.'

'No, you can't.'

'But we're eleven, mum. You've forgotten we're jolly nearly twelve,' expostulated the twins together.

'I haven't forgotten,' said their mother; and indeed as she looked at them she said to herself she was not likely to forget. They were tall slim children, very like each other, with brown curly hair—the curls severely repressed in the case of Ralph—and very alert blue eyes. 'I'm not likely to forget. You look far more, and it'll be the work of the world to get the half tickets for you. All the same, you're not going straying round Liverpool by yourselves looking for tunnels, whatever they're made of. Besides, there isn't time. Look at the clock.'

Ralph, who was punctual by nature, looked at the clock. It was after eight and their train left Lime Street station at 9.10.

'Can't be done, Ju. Another twenty minutes and we ought to be pushing off.'

'All right.' For Judy everything that Ralph said was all right. 'Let's have a look round here instead.'

So the twins left the table as soon as they had finished, and expended their energy in examining the hotel. The other four stayed where they were, thankful to be still.

'I'm better,' announced Meg, comfortably. She was a squarely built child of ten, with a round chubby face and a mop of straight fair hair as yellow and shiny as barley sugar. 'I'll have some more bread and milk if there is any.'

'That's right,' said her mother. 'Now, Karen, wake up, darling, and get on with yours. And, Biddy, you have another cup of tea.'

Karen ate and listened, still in a dream. She heard her mother's cheerful, tired voice; an occasional remark



from Meg, who never wasted words; and a lamentation from Biddy in her rich Irish voice that rose and fell, dark and light, loud and sharp one moment, mournful and quiet the next, changeful as the hills of Donegal she had left behind her. How she had found it in her heart to come away she didn't know. It was the blackest day of her life when she opened the door to that admiral, that admiral that would buy the heart out of your body. Fairly blossomed with gold he was.

Karen knew all about the admiral. He had come driving up to the door of Glenamoyle in a grey car, a long slim car like a weasel, and bought the house and the farm and everything else as easily as you'd buy a pair of shoes. That was why they were travelling like this, away from Ireland to their new home.

'Oh, Biddy, you mustn't say that. How could I have got the children to these good schools if it hadn't been for the admiral. It was a good thing he was blossomed with gold, as you call it. And of course you had to come with me. How could I possibly get them into a new house without you to help me?'

'If it was a farm now, and cows in it——'

'Biddy, you know quite well it's not a farm or anything like it. It's a horrid little house in a street. Have another cup of tea and you'll feel better.'

Biddy drank her tea, and, sure enough, began to cheer up. 'The world's very severe,' she said largely. 'An' who'd be botherin' with it.'

After that she turned her attention to Karen. Talking, coaxing, in a voice that was all honey, she persuaded the bread and milk down her throat, took her to a place that was all shining taps and boiling hot water to freshen up, and had her lively as any of them by the time they

were getting into the train. There was nothing dull about Biddy.

Ralph had got them a carriage to themselves.

‘The best thing you four can do,’ he said grandly, ‘is to have a good old shut-eye. Ju and I will do all the work.’

Karen, at all events, took his advice. She lay on the



seat, put her head on her mother's lap and listened to the train singing away at its own particular tune—a better tune than the boat, she decided. She hummed another little tune to go with it and in a few moments she was asleep.

When she woke up they were nearly there and her mother was telling them about the house.

‘You mustn't expect it to be at all like Glenamoyle,’ she was saying. ‘It's altogether different. It's a small house in a street, in a terrace. You go up four

steps to the front door, then there's a room on your left and another behind that—that's the dining-room——'

'And a garden room like we had?'

'No. No garden room. Two sitting-rooms and just a little strip of a garden——'

'Little *strip*——.'

'Only a little *strip* of a garden?'

'And what more than a strip would you be wantin' to a house and it in a grand town with shops at every corner?'

This was from Biddy. Karen caught the quick smile her mother gave her.

'Yes, lots of shops, as Biddy says. Heaps to do at your schools, too. You won't miss the garden, you'll be so busy.'

'Just a dining-room and a drawing-room?' Judith's voice had a discontented edge to it.

'And isn't that enough,' asked Biddy, 'and you out, footing it away to school every day?'

'It's got to be,' said her mother. 'We've taken it for seven years.'

Seven years. It seemed a lifetime.

'We'll be eighteen, Ju and I. Getting a job,' said Ralph solemnly. 'Karen's eight.' He counted up. 'She'll be fifteen. Gosh.'

It was a sobering thought—Karen, the baby of them, fifteen.

'Well, there's plenty to do before that,' said his mother, and laughed at him. 'Here we are at Bristol, anyway.'

It was late April and the little house had a fine stream of sunlight pouring in at its windows. The Glenamoyle

furniture had been much too big for its small rooms and what the admiral's gold had not bought was left behind. Everything in it, therefore, was new and strange—a good thing as there was no making comparisons between Glenamoyle and something so entirely different. There was plenty to admire, and they rushed about from room to room, Biddy striding after them, determinedly cheerful, finding everything perfect. It was a great wee kitchen, she said, and in no time she was in it making them oaten bread and boiling the eggs for their tea.

They sat round the kitchen table because the dining-room was full of luggage, and made plans for the future. There was only a week before term began and, as their mother had said, there was plenty to do; school clothes to be fitted, books to be bought, the entrance examinations—a new and fearful word—to be passed.

‘What will we do if we don’t pass?’ asked Karen worriedly.

Her mother tried to be comforting with ‘It’s not that kind of examination. It’s only to see what you know,’ which to Karen made it worse. She had hoped no one would ever find out what she knew and how little it was.

‘We might be batty, the lot of us,’ said Ralph cheerfully.

‘You might, of course,’ said his mother, ‘but you’re not. I should have noticed it.’

The twins were clever children and, in spite of rather unorthodox teaching at Glenamoyle, they sailed comfortably into the top form of their respective junior schools. Meg was in the lower third and they put Karen into the second form because she was rather old for the first. She was in, however. They were all in.

They weren't batty as Ralph had suggested, and that was something.

Their blue serge uniforms and white shirts and straw hats with the maroon ribbon were laid out ready for the awful morning when term should begin—and then, when the day dawned, if Karen didn't wake up with influenza.

'I've got a pain in my hands. A fearful pain.'

'Darling, in your hands? Why your hands? Don't you mean your inside?'

'No, I don't. It's specially my hands.'

'Well, you don't walk to school on your hands, so never mind. Hurry up or we shall be late,' said Judy briskly.

But there was no school for Karen. Her bed was made up in her mother's room and away she went to it, cut off from every one.

All she could do was to listen to the new noises so unlike Glenamoyle noises. Every morning a tornado swept through the house; a storm of alarm-clocks, banging doors, rushes up and down stairs, shouts for books, for breakfast, for the time, for Biddy. At a quarter to nine it ceased as suddenly as it began, and silence descended. The family had gone to school.

At the time Karen wept that she was out of it all, but afterwards, looking back, she was grateful for that influenza germ. Without that little illness she might never have paid her visit to Aunt Anne. And without that visit she might never have touched Aunt Anne's piano.

## CHAPTER II

### AUNT ANNE'S PIANO

AFTER Karen had been in bed nearly a fortnight her mother came and sat down beside her, a letter in her hand.

'You've got an aunt. Aunt Anne. Did you know that?'

'Have I? A real aunt?'

It was surprising. Aunts were not things the Forrest family went in for.

'Not exactly a real aunt. She's my aunt by marriage. She has heard of us—through the doctor, I think—and here's such a kind letter. You're going to stay with her in a week or two when you're a bit better.'

'Am I?' said Karen. 'I don't want to.'

'Oh yes, you do. She has a little house in the country, she says. Five miles out of Bristol. As soon as you can go she's sending a taxi for you.'

There didn't seem any use arguing about it. One comfort was that when the taxi came it was a Saturday, and the rest of the family came along too, to meet Aunt Anne, have tea, and generally settle Karen in. It was now June. The first newness of school had worn off and an outing like this was just what they wanted. They fitted nicely into the taxi, Karen wedged between her mother and Judy, with Ralph and Meg opposite.

Aunt Anne, it appeared, lived in a village called Sharpset.

'Sharpset. Sounds a bit thorny,' said Ralph. 'What's she like, mum?'

'I don't know. I believe I saw her when I was a small child. I rather think she was the aunt we loved because she played us tunes to dance to.'

Tunes? Karen pricked up her ears at that. If there was a thing she loved it was a tune.

'I wonder what she's like,' said Judy thoughtfully. 'Tall and thin and sharp like Miss Bell, or fat and short and funny like Miss Harris, or sort of dreamy like Miss——'

'I don't suppose she's in the least like any of the mistresses at your school,' said her mother shortly. 'She must be quite fairly old, for one thing.'

Karen's heart sank. Here she was, going to stay with an utterly unknown aunt. How awful it was!

'Will she be nice?' she asked, and her mother said 'Of course' in a vague way that showed she had no idea.

'She must be all right or she wouldn't have sent a taxi,' said Meg in her calm voice.

'True for you, me boyo,' said Ralph.

'Now don't you go talking like Biddy or she won't understand you,' said his mother.

'Won't understand you!' The aunt was going to be an altogether new sort of person who wouldn't understand people who talked like Biddy. Karen looked with loathing at the suit-case that contained all the clothes she possessed and Meg's dressing-gown.

'Are you sure she asked me to *stay*?' she inquired in a small voice.

'Yes, quite sure, darling.'

'But do you think she *wants* me? She can't.'

'If she didn't she wouldn't have asked you,' said Ralph in his logical way.

There was something solid and comfortable about that, as there often was about Ralph's remarks. Karen worried no more but tucked her arm further into her mother's and listened to the engine droning away higher and higher as they whizzed along a stretch of good road. It was humming a good little tune and, as usual, she hummed another of her own to go with it.

'Oh, listen, there 's Karen off again,' cried Ralph, and her mother said: 'Don't hum, darling.'

Karen stopped, annoyed with herself. She hummed by accident, as she always told them. Things like engines had a way of starting her off.

Her mother gave her arm a cheerful squeeze and said 'Never mind, my bumble-bee. You can hum all day at Aunt Anne's. Remember her dance tunes.' And before she could say any more the engine stopped and they had arrived.

Aunt Anne turned out to be a lovely person in a flat round hat that covered very untidy grey hair, and huge gloves, watering the garden with a hose. She made it clear that they were all very welcome, particularly Karen who was to pay a real visit. And Mrs Bent, who was boiling the kettle for tea, was nearly as nice. So that was all right.

'You'll be happy with her. Any one would,' said her mother, as she was unpacking Karen's suit-case for her. 'Be tidy, though, for goodness' sake, or that Mrs Bent will be after you. She 's not Biddy, remember.'

Karen sighed. Biddy was the untidiest person in the world and she, Karen, was the second untidiest. So her mother said.





‘She is the aunt who played dance tunes so be sure to ask her to play the piano to you. Did you see it filling up the sitting-room?’

Karen had indeed. She was dying to hear it. It was the first time she had ever stayed in a house with a piano. She had, in fact, hardly heard a note of music beyond Barney who always brought his fiddle when he came with the turf. He had taught her to love tunes. One he called *The Snowy Breasted Pearl*, whatever that might mean. He’d play it through, finishing off with a great flourish of his bow, and then say: ‘Put that at the back of your soul, achora.’ He had another called *Drink*, an easy name to remember and an easy tune to sing; she herself loved it best of all though Barney said it was ‘foreign.’



She thought of Barney that night, tossing about in her big bed in the small room at the top of the stairs. It was dreadful. She had had a chance of hearing some music again and she had missed it—missed it.

The June evening came round the curtains and in at the door that was left open in case she felt lonely. The June country sounds came in too, rooks cawing and a donkey that hee-hawed in the desperate, exasperated way donkeys do. Aunt Anne had said that sounds like that would send any one to sleep, but no such thing—they didn't. The afternoon had gone wrong. She had seen the others off to the bus that took them home; then there had been supper and saying good night to Mrs Bent; she had had no chance of getting a note out of

Aunt Anne's piano, and now she couldn't sleep a wink. There had been music to be got and she had missed it. She was lost wanting it, as Biddy would say.

Then, when she had turned over for the hundredth time, telling herself she must wait for to-morrow, lo! it began.

She sat up in bed. It was a lovely, steady little tune Aunt Anne was playing; the kind that has a pattern, a shape; the kind you can sing. It finished itself off and then it changed to something that escaped her in the most maddening way. She must hear it better. She slipped her feet out of bed, put on Meg's dressing-gown, and crept downstairs. No one would see her. In fact, there was no one to see her because Mrs Bent had gone to her own cottage for the night and she and Aunt Anne were alone in the house.

She sat down on the bottom step and set herself to listen. Through the crack of the door she could just see Aunt Anne, one candle in a brass candlestick helping the dusky light to let her read the music propped up in front of her, her forehead wrinkled in a ferocious frown of concentration. She played the steady little tune again; then it entangled itself in a maze of other notes and was lost. Sometimes it seemed to be there and she frowned ferociously too in her efforts to catch it. On the whole it seemed better just to let the sounds pour over her as they pleased and hear what she could. Then joy! The steady little tune came back, complete, this time high and strong and more lovely and singable than ever.

'You're a good, quiet audience,' called Aunt Anne through the door, and Karen jumped. So she had seen her all the time.

'Come in and tell me if you like it.'

The good, quiet audience went in and sat down on the edge of a chair.

'I never get tired of this thing myself and it's just right for this time of night. Put me on a desert island with a piano and all that Brahms—and perhaps Bach—wrote for it and I'd be happy. Not that he wrote this duck of a tune. It's a folk-song or something.'

What Aunt Anne was talking about, who or what this Brahms was, Karen had no idea. She had come to listen and listen she did. Away it went again, the lovely tune; she was getting to know it, and this time when it was woven with the other tunes she could still hear it. It was like a golden thread woven in tweed. Aunt Anne began again for the third time, then stopped. 'Good practice for me,' she grunted in an annoyed voice, 'but nothing on earth will ever make me get that bit in the middle.' Karen could hear for herself that she was floundering, both hands close together, with a sort of quiet roar coming from the piano, all the notes buzzing together. 'Put down the loud pedal and pray, that's what I do.' Then she looked fiercely at Karen. 'But *you* mustn't. You mustn't do that.'

'I won't,' said Karen fervently, with no idea what she meant.

'That's enough, even of Op. 117.' Aunt Anne slapped the music together briskly. 'Now what will you have?'

Karen was not going back to bed if she could keep Aunt Anne at it. She bethought herself of Barney and his fiddle and asked for *Drink*.

'*Drink?*' queried Aunt Anne, her head on one side like a wise old parrot. 'I seem to remember something

called *Beer, beer, glorious beer.*' And she played a melancholy dirge-like tune.

Karen shook her head. *Drink* was not a bit like that.

'Sing it to me then.'

In a mouse-like voice Karen managed to pipe the beginning of her favourite tune. 'Then it goes up, louder and louder, and then back to where it started from.'

Aunt Anne bent her head still further and caught it, triumphantly, like a fieldsman bringing off a difficult catch in the slips.

'I've got it. *Drink to me only with thine eyes.* That's just what I can play,' and out came Barney's melody through to the very end where the tune settled down in the way Karen found so satisfying.

'Oh, lovely, lovely,' she cried, beside herself.

Aunt Anne looked at her with interest.

'You're eight. Aren't you learning the piano?'

Karen shook her head. Their mother had told them they were quite old enough to understand the finances of the family. She showed them an enormous account book with all their names entered, and their individual expenses. 'Quite enough for us all to get along very well, but no extras. No extras for any one.' Music was an extra.

'Would you like to try?'

Would she! She was on the music stool with her hands on the piano in the wink of an eyelid.

'Don't bang,' admonished Aunt Anne. 'Play a note and listen to it.'

Karen's admiration for her aunt grew vast as the sea. The notes, most surprisingly, were quite stiff and heavy.

To put them down with separate fingers as she had done seemed nothing short of a miracle. You slid off the black notes as if they were made of ice. All the same, played one after the other they made an entrancing little tune of their own. She soon discovered that.

'Quite right,' said Aunt Anne. 'Listen to yourself. Now play that note three times and then the black one just above it. What does it make?'

Wonderful! It was the beginning of *Drink*.

She must find the rest. Forgetting everything she set herself to follow the melody hidden away in the piano like Curdie following his thread through the pile of stones. She pursued it with one finger, with bloodhound persistency, and, sure enough, out it came, somewhat mangled, but recognizably Barney's tune.

'You've got an ear,' said Aunt Anne.

Of course she had an ear. In point of fact two like every one else.

'I mean you're a musical child. Don't you want to play?'

Don't you want to play? Aunt Anne might as well have said don't you want to breathe, to eat, to drink, to run about. Karen at the moment had never wanted anything so much in all her eight years.

She nodded her head because her feelings were not the kind that go easily into words.



'I might start you,' said Aunt Anne meditatively.

'Now?'

'Well, not actually now this moment.' She seemed amused.

'Can I play *Drink* again then?'

This time it came better, rather more quickly, with fewer bad shots. 'Oh, it's a *shining* tune,' Karen cried, and flung her arms round her aunt's neck.

She went back to bed treading on air, and all that night in her dreams she was following shining tunes through a maze of notes, black and white, red and green, yellow and blue. Sometimes they covered and hid it and she had to lift them out of the way one by one, as Curdie lifted his stones; sometimes it lay clear like a stream and she ran breathlessly beside it; sometimes it was lost underground and she groped miserably in the dark till she caught its gleam again. Always it was there; whether she could see it or not she knew it was there.

## CHAPTER III

### THE PARISH PIANO

THE family came out by bus the following Saturday. They seemed to Karen to have grown a lot older.

‘Poor Karen. It’s dreadful for you missing half a term like this,’ said Judy pityingly.

Karen took Meg aside for a private talk. There was something very reliable about Meg.

‘Is it really dreadful? Missing school, I mean.’

‘Well,’ said Meg, in her slow way, ‘they do things in forms, you know, and you aren’t there.’

Karen agreed with the end of that remark. She wasn’t there.

‘I mean every form does something at the end of term. You get chosen.’

‘Oh, I see. Are you going to be chosen?’

Meg said, cautiously, that she just might. Drill and gym. She liked it.

‘And is Judy going to be chosen?’

Not for gym. She was no good at that. But Judy was joining things. Joining things like anything.

‘What sort of things?’

Meg was vague. They did things in the upper third that the lower third never dreamt of. Guides, for one thing.

‘And what about Ralph?’

Meg was vaguer than ever about Ralph. What he did when he left the house at a quarter to nine no one



had any idea. He went to school and that was all they knew. He didn't say much, but Judy talked like anything.

In spite of this interesting conversation with Meg, Karen was very sorry when a fortnight later Aunt Anne read a letter and said: 'You're well now. Your mother says it's time to go back to school.' School might be an interesting, even an exciting, place with its chance of joining things and getting mysteriously chosen, but nothing, nothing could compare with this music she was having all day long with Aunt Anne.

'Oh, must I?'

'I'm afraid so.'

'But I want to go on with the piano.'

'Well, so you can. You can have some music to take home if you like,' said her aunt.

They squashed into her suit-case an old battered music case containing an instruction book and guide to the pianoforte, ten leaves out of a volume of Mendelssohn's *Songs Without Words*—all Aunt Anne had left of it—and a new Schumann's *Kinderscenen* with a picture on the cover.

Karen unpacked them proudly and showed them to her mother.

'D' you see this, mummy? I've learnt the piano.'

'Have you, darling? That must have been fun,' murmured her mother absent-mindedly, saying to herself that Karen really must have new shoes, the pair she was wearing were altogether too small; they would ruin her feet.

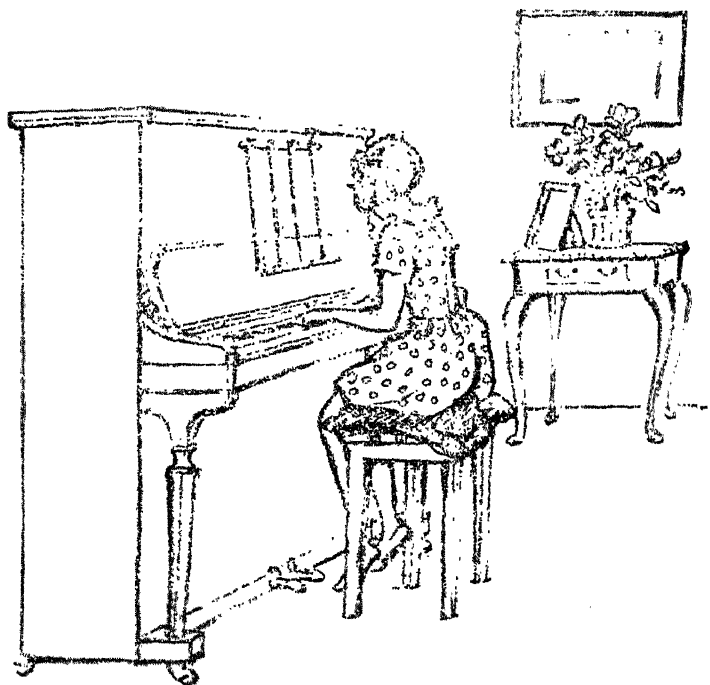
Karen thought over that remark.

Not fun, exactly. Certainly not *fun*. Aunt Anne had

an exercise of her own invention to make you use all your fingers instead of prodding each note with one—so much easier. You sang ‘Go to bed, Tom’ and played three notes up the scale with your first, second, and third fingers, one note for each word; then back to your thumb for ‘Tom.’ Then you did the same thing leaving out the thumb and beginning with the first finger. After that it was worse still. You left out the first finger and began with the second and the notes would hardly sound at all, those fingers were so weak. It was difficult to believe that anyone used their little fingers if they could help it, but Aunt Anne declared they did. ‘What you have to do,’ was her awful explanation, ‘is to get your fingers equally strong,’ and when Karen tried to explain that she could play all she wanted with two fingers, or anyhow three, she merely cried ‘Rubbish’ and walked away.

But at the end of the three weeks Tom could go to bed with all the fingers of the right hand, though very quietly with some of them, and Aunt Anne beamed and said: ‘It’s interesting, isn’t it? Here’s a new word for you—“technique.” That’s technique.’

Karen learnt her new word, one she was going to hear a good deal in years to come, and discovered it certainly was interesting to find you could do a thing you couldn’t have dreamt of a fortnight before. But best of all, the real thrill, was the feeling about for tunes. ‘Play this,’ Aunt Anne would cry, and moan out in a miserable voice a song like *Annie Laurie*—something they both knew. Then they would track it down on the piano with cries of joy. Fingers were nothing then; the only thing that mattered was the right note. *Drink* remained her concert piece, so to speak, particularly after Aunt.



Anne had told her to find something in the left hand to go with it. It was wonderful how well it sounded when she got a note here and there that matched. On her last evening she played it to Mrs Bent who, she found, popped across from her cottage night and morning to put Aunt Anne's house to rights, not only in the afternoons to boil the kettle when there were people for tea. One of the nice things about Mrs Bent was that she didn't walk, she popped everywhere—down to the post, up to the butcher, along to the post office. 'I'll just pop in and 'ear you play your piece to your aunty,' she said, and in she popped, wearing a hat, as good as her word. She sat down on the sofa, Karen's first audience, and listened to *Drink* right through from beginning to end;



and Karen, tense as a fiddle string, learnt, once and for all, the difference between playing to yourself and playing in public.

‘It wasn’t fun. It was heavenly!’ she cried, and Mrs Forrest looked up from the shoe she was examining, surprised at the thrill in her voice. Aunt Anne must have been very sweet to the child to make her enjoy the visit so much. All the same she could wish it had been shoes she had been given instead of all that music.

Karen kept out the instruction book and laid the rest reverently in the top drawer of the chest shared with Meg.

‘I ’m going to play it. All of it.’

'Are you, darling? But where?'

Where indeed? That was the trouble. Aunt Anne had kept her promise. 'I might start you,' she had said and very soon a letter came with Karen's bus fare and an invitation for every Saturday afternoon. Once a week she went to Sharpset for a lesson, a practice, and tea—and her fingers remained as weak as a baby's. If only it had been every day—or even every second day. She added drumming her fingers on the table to the humming, and 'Don't drum, don't hum, Karen' became another family war cry.

It was Biddy who came to the rescue.

It was nearly the end of the summer term and they had all been to the high school to see the drill display because Meg, sure enough, had had the honour of being chosen to represent her form. There she was in her green linen shorts and white shirt doing it all without a mistake; they watched, astonished at her, but proud that she belonged to them, and afterwards she walked, or rather pranced, home, hanging on to her mother's arm with Judy the other side. Karen came behind with Biddy.

'She's a great wee girl is Meg,' said Biddy. 'As good a driller as ye'd get within the ringin' of a bell.'

That was high praise from Biddy and Karen agreed with every word. Meg was good at the job. But as soon as she had been picked out—and that was a good month ago—she had had extra coaching every week, sometimes twice a week. It was easy enough for Meg; she didn't cost anything for 'extras.' Even the green shorts were well received because they would do for the holidays and make a good pattern for others. If only piano practice could be got as easily.

She heaved a deep sigh.

'Whisht now,' said Biddy reprovingly, 'don't be lamenting on us that way. Is it the green breeks?'

'No, no, no,' cried Karen, and danced with rage that Biddy could think it that. The last things she wanted was to wear green linen shorts and march about in front of people.

'Take a hold of me arm then and tell me, alanna,' said Biddy.

Biddy was something like six foot, a giant of a woman with a lean frame and stooping back toughened by years of milking cows and making butter with an old-fashioned churn. To put your arm in hers was like hitching yourself to the branch of a tree.

Karen hooked herself on and began.

What she wanted, she explained, was not to exercise her body like Meg but to exercise her fingers—just her fingers. To get the music out of them. In short, to play on a piano with them. Wasn't there a piano in the whole of Bristol or Clifton she could have for an hour or so?

Biddy was sympathetic.



'The darlin' old tunes, 'deed I'm wantin' them meself,' she said. 'If Barney was to come in at the door and he with his fiddle me heart would give a lep, it would.'

Then she became thoughtful, and when Biddy thought there was generally a result. Not for nothing had she been Mrs Forrest's mainstay and prop in all the years they had spent in Donegal.

'Och, wait till I tell ye now,' she said at last.

There was a Miss Hemans, a dried-up wee stick of a woman but none the worse for that. Didn't she clean the parish hall away at the back of their house, and she sweeping and scrubbing as if the devil was at her heels? (Biddy had a robust turn of speech that belonged to her farm days.) What was the harm of asking if there wasn't a piano stuck away in the hall somewhere? There'd sure be no scarcity of pianos in a great rich place like that.

There was more than a thread of hope in that. Halls certainly were places where there were pianos.

'Let's go and see,' said Karen. They shouted out to the others that they were 'taking a bit of a dander round,' and turned down Church Street to see if they could find Miss Hemans in the little house between the church and hall where Biddy said she lived.

Miss Hemans answered the door in a hat, a hat she wore all day in case her duties should take her into the church. Karen was never to see her without that same hat, a shiny black straw with a bunch of violets on one side and a hat pin like a dagger that skewered it on to her head. She looked apprehensively at the pair who confronted her. What she saw was a huge gaunt woman, thin as a rake, with uncomfortably brilliant

eyes that looked from under the brim of an outrageous hat. It was, in point of fact, a hat that Biddy and Judy had bought together at McGuire's store the day before they left. McGuire had picked it out himself—'a good rousin' green to put you in mind of Ireland,' he said, and had it in a bag and paid for before they could get in a word. Hanging on the arm of this great creature was a small girl who, Miss Hemans considered, might have worn the hat, any hat, with advantage. What was the matter with the children nowadays that they wouldn't wear hats? They should be made to—nice hats with daisies round the crown. Miss Hemans, with a sister struggling in a milliner's shop, felt strongly about this. This child had dark hair brushed away from a little thin face that was all bumpy forehead; her grey eyes gave you a turn, so large were they and so questioning. A nice blue hat with daisies would have taken the hunger out of them. Miss Hemans, who liked little girls to have pink cheeks, blue eyes, and yellow hair, didn't take to her, or to the woman either. They looked, both of them, like people who would insist on *doing* something, or, worse still, making her do something. Miss Hemans was so mortally afraid of doing the wrong thing that she contrived her life so that it was practically free from any action at all. If one did nothing it was impossible to do the wrong thing. She had inherited the job of cleaning the parish hall from her widowed mother, who had trained her into it, ordering her about with perpetual little commands as persistent as the ticking of a clock, and then died, murmuring with her dying breath that nothing in the routine was to be changed.

So nothing was changed. Not even the flowers in Miss Heman's hat.



There was a piano, Miss Hemans admitted, when the big woman, in an odd husky voice that seemed to string the words together so oddly, made known what they wanted. There was a large one, given by the churchwarden when he moved into a smaller house, that stood on the platform. It was always kept locked and she couldn't ask for the key—no, she wouldn't like to do that. There was another smaller piano by the sink. Mr James, the organist, didn't hold with any one playing it and had had it put in the kitchen with its face to the wall so that no one couldn't touch it. Why he done that she wouldn't hardly like to say but there it was. No, she wouldn't move it, not for worlds. Mr James mightn't like it. Besides, what 's done 's done.

But Biddy, full of the useful contrariness of the Irish, did not find that what is done is done. On the contrary what was done could almost invariably be undone by a person with a little strength of character. She did not propose to do anything about the locked piano for the moment, but a small piano with its face to the wall, why, it would be nothing but a pleasure to put the poor thing right way round.

'Now isn't that just the height of luck,' she beamed on the mistrustful Miss Hemans. 'Just show me the wee thing and I'll have it right.'

'Oh, no, I shouldn't like to do that. I shouldn't like to 'ave it interfered with.'

'I'll not be interferin' or anythin' that way. I'll just be shiftin' it the way ye'd shift yer kitchen table. I'll go better.'

Miss Hemans backed into her house.

'No, no, I shouldn't like to do that. We 'ave the men to move the piano.'

‘Is it men?’ In two strides Biddy was after her, blocking up the passage. ‘And me a dairy woman that ’s raised a cow in me arms and carried her into the byre. Did I not now?’

This was to Karen.

‘You did.’ And she murmured to herself, ‘It was a calf,’ just to ease her conscience.

Miss Hemans only knew cows as the necessary creatures who provided milk for her tea. ‘She gives me cream with all her might, to eat with apple tart,’ a line out of a poem recited at the last social by a child with lovely curls, was, she thought, beautiful and true, and all that need be known about cows.

‘A piano isn’t a cow,’ she said feebly.

Biddy gave a yelp of laughter.

‘Begor, it ’s not. Ye wouldn’t be astray on that.’

Karen plucked her by the arm. Miss Hemans was looking at her like a frightened hen. In another minute she would cluck, spread her wings, and rush up her stairs, chittering, and all chance of getting to these pianos would be gone.

Biddy took the hint. The conversation was not going well. Dropping her voice to a soft murmur she explained that it was Karen, the wee girl, who just wanted the feel of a piano under her like some wee girls wanted a pony. Nothing would hold her but she must have it. Didn’t they live just down the road and the mistress had said she ’d never let her do it, only to play the piano in the church hall that was kept like the gates of heaven with the cleaning it had.

Mollified by this and enslaved by the lilting quality of Biddy’s voice, Miss Hemans revived and said perhaps it would do no harm; perhaps no one would know.

But would the girl be careful? Did she know how to play?

Biddy burst out again.

Is it playin'? She'd play the hair off yer head. It comes as aisy to her as fleas to a dog.'

'Fleas . . .' A tremor shook Miss Hemans. 'No dogs in the parish hall. The vicar, he——'

'No, no, no, Biddy doesn't mean that. She's saying I want to practise, that's all.'

Karen never knew how she got Miss Hemans to the piano, but get her there she did. Biddy, having done her best, began to darken ominously. She was renowned at Glenamoyle for a temper that rose as suddenly and furiously as milk on the boil. 'Lord bless us and save us, ye wouldn't find the baitin' of her in the whole congregation!' she growled, as if Miss Hemans was deaf, or not there at all. 'Come away home out of this.'

But Karen, desperate, caught the caretaker's thin dry hand in her own that pulsed with the energy stored up ready for the piano, and dragged her out of the house and up the two steps to the church-like door that she guessed gave into the hall.

It is wonderful what the feel of a hand can do, what it will transmit from one person to another. From the moment Miss Hemans felt Karen's hand in hers she was her slave. She found herself in the little room that did duty as a kitchen, lifting the cups and saucers off the top of a small cottage piano and the lid that covered its keyboard and talking almost apologetically.

'I always say nothing 'ot nor yet ices shouldn't be put on it, and I never don't let any one sit on the top with their feet on the notes, not since it's

bin in 'ere. But we seem to 'ave to use it for the extra cups.'

She said this guiltily while she watched the reverence with which Karen raised the lid and looked at the battered notes underneath.

Biddy pulled the little piano out and turned it round as if it weighed a feather. Miss Hemans, twittering excuses, ran to get a dust-pan and brush; she felt a burning disgrace to see the dirt that had accumulated behind it. What would her mother have said? Who would have thought there was all that mess hidden away? But she couldn't pull things about, not like she used, on account of her rheumatism.

She need not have wasted her breath. Neither of her visitors took the slightest notice of dust or of what she was saying.

Biddy was lost in admiration of the green silk that backed the ancient fretwork that fronted the case. She offended Miss Hemans still further by saying she would bring a duster to it 'the way you'd see the shine of it down the street.' Karen was made speechless by sudden affection for the thing. It was a very old piano, but in faded gilt letters it announced itself as a 'Broadwood.' Aunt Anne's was a Broadwood, too, and that, Karen felt, was an introduction. Its ivory keys were yellow and brown with age. 'Ye'd be sayin' it was old by the teeth of it,' Biddy remarked softly, not in any way disparagingly. For all she knew age might be an advantage to a piano. Barney had set great store by his fiddle that had belonged to his grandfather and was old then. The middle of the keyboard, when Karen tried it, was worn to a shadow of itself; four notes were dumb, two stuck and had to be lifted—raised as Biddy had

raised the cow—before they could be struck again. Others had to be hit very hard before they would even give out the most muffled of sounds.

‘That’s what Mr James said. They’ve gone dead,’ said Miss Hemans with a sad sniff. ‘It’s the ’ymns. ’Ymns seem as if they ’ave to be in the middle, both ’ands at it together, like. Wore ’em out, ’itting the ’ymns, that’s what Mr James done at choir practice.’

‘Och, haven’t they a right to be dead with the great age of it,’ said Biddy respectfully, and she added hopefully: ‘Try it above, alanna.’

The bass jangled and buzzed, but above the piano was decidedly better. Biddy pulled up a chair and Karen played *Nellie Bly* out of her instruction book, besides *Drink* and the rest of her repertoire, on the two highest octaves. The notes tinkled away, not too out of tune, with a thin little sound, clear and sweet like a musical box.

Biddy turned on Miss Hemans.

‘There!’ she cried triumphantly. ‘What was I after tellin’ ye. Ye wouldn’t feel it, the wee girl playin’ it, no more than a feather. Now would ye?’ And Miss Hemans had to confess that she wouldn’t; that if Karen was to drop in mornings when no one was about she wouldn’t say but that there would be no harm done. That was Miss Heman’s cryptic way of giving permission. Truth to tell, she still had the feel of Karen’s urgent hand in hers, the squeeze of the determined fingers that drew the music out of an old piano that had been as good as thrown away. There was nothing to do but give way to determination like that.

‘Oh, thank you, thank you,’ cried Karen. She could have hugged Miss Hemans. The old piano with its

fretwork and frayed silk was all she wanted. School stopped at twelve. The kitchen was never used then. Dinner wasn't till one, and she got home by ten minutes past twelve. There was heaps of time. Heaps and heaps. Her eyes shone, and her lips were red. Miss Hemans was constrained to admit that she was not a plain little girl after all. But generally children only looked like that when the ices were coming round.

'Away then, and thank ye,' said Biddy. 'The mistress'll have the tea made and it waitin' on us.'

What a way to put it! Upside down, in a voice that was all lights and shades like a windy day. Miss Hemans sniffed as she watched the pair disappear down the street. The woman took long strides like a man; no wonder she had lifted a cow with those great arms that swung her along like oars. The child danced ahead gazing at her hands, the fingers spread out; it seemed as if she was too happy to walk. She would have a look at her now and again to see how she was getting along with her practising. Miss Hemans promised herself that as she turned into her own gate, and the first thing she did when she had shut her front door was to hunt up a recipe she had had, years ago, for making toffee. You could make friends through a bit of toffee; she'd noticed that.



## CHAPTER IV

### THE CHURCHWARDEN'S PIANO

THE term ended, summer holidays went by in a flash, and the winter saw Karen settled down comfortably to her Saturday piano lessons and making friends with Aunt Anne. Aunt Anne had been very pleased about the Parish Hall piano. All the great people, she said, had somehow managed to get their practice, though it hadn't always been easy; and she produced a picture of Handel being discovered in his night-shirt, aged six, sitting at the piano in the attic where he had stolen up to play in the middle of the night. Why didn't his father want him to practise, Karen wondered, and Aunt Anne explained that there wasn't much money in music as a profession—or, at all events, so Handel's father had thought. 'But in the end he wrote the *Messiah* and made quite as much as was good for him,' she added.

Karen was relieved to hear that. She had discussed with Meg, privately, the idea of 'going in' for music. Meg was favouring the idea of games and gym for herself; she meant to be like Miss Johns, the games mistress at school. She would wear green linen shorts in the summer but purple ones in the winter, because no one liked purple—except of course the King and Queen. Karen was certain it must be music and nothing else for her. It might cost something, but, as Meg pointed out, it didn't mean special clothes, and that was a great thing. She decided, however, to keep her ambition to herself for the present. Mrs Forrest always said she would

follow her one day and hear how she was getting on with the practice she and Biddy had arranged so cleverly together, but the hour before the children's dinner was a busy one, and somehow she never made the time. Karen was no trouble; she came home punctually and happily, generally humming. Who was to know that was because Miss Hemans appeared with the regularity of an alarm clock at five minutes to one, a piece of heavenly home-made toffee in her hand, shut down the lid of the piano, and drove her away? Mrs Forrest, even if she had seen Miss Hemans, could never have guessed that.

Aunt Anne, too, was better kept in the dark about the future. The hall piano helped matters a lot, even though there was only the treble to play on. Karen learnt all the pieces in the instruction book very quickly, but, Aunt Anne was afraid, chiefly by ear.

'You mustn't do that. You mustn't look at your hands. I remember I was never allowed to look at my hands,' she said, worriedly, and caused a friend of Mrs Bent's, who was a carpenter, to make a board that fitted the keyboard of her piano from end to end. It was supported by uprights, six inches high, at each end, and under that canopy Karen's hands had to creep and crawl, finding their way to the right notes by themselves, as it were. That was how Aunt Anne had practised during a happy year of her girlhood, when she had gone away to 'finish' and had had lessons. It had, she declared, done her a great deal of good.

The board taught Karen to read. She looked at her music because there was nothing else to look at, and Aunt Anne, by the simple method of giving a scream whenever she played a wrong note, taught her to listen to herself. The lessons were not orthodox. Aunt Anne



never sat down beside her pupil. She never appeared, in fact, to be giving any attention, but wherever she happened to be—in the garden with her hoe, or upstairs turning out a drawer—she heard. ‘Ow! B flat, not B natural,’ she would bawl. ‘Can’t you *hear*? Listen to yourself, for goodness’ sake!’ And Karen, who, as a matter of fact, could hear perfectly when she tried, would hastily correct herself under the board, being careful not to scrape the skin off her knuckles against its rough surface. Mrs Bent’s friend, who had done it cheap, had not wasted his money on sandpaper.

There was no doubt about it, Aunt Anne was truly musical. Her fingers were slow and stiff, but she had a fine sensitive touch, and she played Karen the slower preludes of Chopin, the slow movements of sonatas, the simpler passages of her beloved Brahms pieces, and scraps of melody from any music she had heard; and, in her quiet way, she played them beautifully. Her taste took her to Brahms, but not an inch further. She lumped all later composers together under the heading of ‘jazz’; they upset her and gave her a headache; any one who said they liked them could only be pretending. And Karen, of course, agreed enthusiastically.

She was supremely happy on her Saturday afternoons. The lessons consisted of scales for ten minutes and after that anything she liked. Like a bee gathering honey she turned over the leaves of most of the music in the cabinet beside the piano, taking a sip here and there wherever it looked easy, storing up lovely tunes, as she had once stored up *Drink*, with which to regale Miss Hemans later on.

Miss Hemans was not very discriminating; as an audience that was her only fault.

'Listen to this, Hemsey' (the 'miss' was not long in disappearing), 'it's the tune out of the Beethoven violin concerto. Aunt Anne says it's the most heavenly tune in the whole world.' Or 'Listen to this one; Mrs Bent always asks for it. It's called *Tea for Two*.' And Miss Hemans would duly listen and invariably remark: 'Ever s' nice, isn't it.' All the tunes were nice, just as the weather was nice or a cup of tea was nice when one had scrubbed the floor. All the same she was a real audience; she listened. 'I've 'ad that one,' she would say, sourly, if Karen played something twice through. Also it was most gratifying the way she was everlastingly impressed that Karen could produce such sounds at all. 'I couldn't do it, not if I were to try ever so,' she would say, truthfully enough, as she shut down the lid of the piano; and Karen, her cheeks bulging with toffee, would dance happily home secure in her little possessions—a row of tunes that were her own, that people like Miss Hemans could only have if they asked for them.

However, Derry James, the organist, was young and gay and he was very different. To her rage and indignation he laughed at her. \*

He came in one winter's day to find her perched up on a pile of parish magazines on a kitchen chair, coaxing one of her tunes out of the old demon of a piano he thought he had turned out of the building.

'Hi! That's a Chopin waltz you're trying to play,' he cried, and laughed.

'I know it is,' said Karen stoutly. 'The tune part.'

'But it's not up there. You're two octaves too high.'

'I know I am.'

'And the left hand's all wrong.'

'I know it is.'

'She can't do it no different, sir,' put in Miss Hemans, offendedly. 'Nor no one couldn't. It don't sound no lower, that piano don't.'

'Well, I told you it ought to be thrown away.'

'No, it oughtn't. It's a darling old piano and I like playing up here.'

Karen's voice shook with rage in defence of her treasure.

'Where's your music?'

'I haven't got any.'

'Oh.' Mr James became interested. 'Playing it out of your head, are you? You come in here.'

He lead the way into a larger room, the hall where the piano given by the churchwarden stood on the platform, grandly, as grand pianos do. He took a key from his pocket.

'Here's your piece. You hark to uncle,' he said, and he played her the waltz from beginning to end with the heavenly runs that Aunt Anne always had to leave out. They rippled and ran under his fingers, finishing themselves off with a little quiet 'plop,' as if a stone had been thrown into a pool.

'I'm not a pianist, I'm an organist. I can't do the twiddly bits as I ought, but it's something like that.'

Something like that! Karen screwed her fingers together in ecstasy and implored him to play it again.

'But, you know, it's miles too difficult for you,' he said, when he had run through it again. 'Who on earth is teaching you?'

She told him about Aunt Anne; he listened gravely, then when she came to the board made by Mrs Bent's friend he burst out laughing again. What he found amusing about it she could not imagine. Certainly,

now that she came to think of it, he couldn't have played those runs with a board keeping his hands within six inches of the keyboard. Sometimes they had been quite high up in the air. There would have been no skin left on his knuckles. Still, there was nothing particularly funny about that.

'I daresay Noah taught Ham that way in the Ark,' he said at last. 'But I doubt if it's been used much since. But I tell you what——' he seemed suddenly to have been struck by an idea. 'You're a nice keen kid and you've got the dickens of a good ear. I use this piano for choir practice on Tuesday and Friday nights; I won't lock it up till lunch-time Wednesday and Saturday. If there's no one about you can come and play on it a bit.'

'Oh, sir?' cried Miss Hemans, shocked.

'She won't hurt it. Look at her hands.' Then he tried to look severe. 'What's your name? Karen? Now, Karen, you're not to thump. Let me hear you. Play a scale or an exercise or something, so that I see you don't.'

Karen could hardly believe her ears. She was going to be allowed to play this enormous, magnificent piano. She must show Mr James what she could do. Trembling with excitement she slid on to the stool and began. 'Go to bed, Tom.' He had asked for an exercise and it was the only one she knew.

Horror! Only her thumb and first finger seemed to work. The piano was as heavy as lead; three of her fingers could hardly get their notes down. It was like beginning all over again—like the first time when she had crept downstairs to hear Aunt Anne play Op. 117 and been allowed to try herself.

'Right,' said Derry. 'You 'll have to do a lot of that before you wear out the grand. It 's like a fly taking a walk.'

A fly taking a walk! Karen's face grew scarlet and the tears welled up in her eyes.

'Sorry,' said Derry hastily, for he was a kind-hearted young man. 'Every one 's the same, you know, when they begin. Weak as water. As a matter of fact you 've got jolly good hands; all you 've got to do is to exercise them a bit. This piano 's particularly stiff and the old thing in the kitchen is as loose as a bag of nuts. No practice at all. And I expect the thing under the board is much the same.'

He rushed off and Karen walked home with feet nearly as heavy as the piano she had tried to play. For the first time she was late.

'Half after one,' said Biddy, meeting her at the door, trying to be stern. She was always late herself.

'I know. Have they finished?'

'Is it dinner? There isn't a bit in the house they haven't it ate.'

This was only Biddy's way of saying the family had begun.

'I don't care. I don't want any.'

She didn't mind if she never ate again. How could pianos be so different! Aunt Anne's was stiffer than the little one in the kitchen, but the grand—she would never, never play it. What did people do? They couldn't take their pianos about with them as Barney took his fiddle.

Biddy was staring at her.

'What is it, alanna? Is it the old dirge? That Miss Hemans?'



Miss Hemans and Bidy still did not take to each other.

It was difficult to explain to Bidy; still more difficult to explain to the family who had reached the pudding stage and naturally wanted to know what was the matter.

They tried to be sympathetic.

'Make a good dinner, darling, and we'll see what we can do,' said her mother.

Do? There was nothing any one could do except give her a new set of fingers, said Karen, and wept into her gravy.

Ralph tried to be constructive. He and Judy had both had removes into their respective senior schools and he now went off every morning attired in a black coat and dark striped trousers looking like a retired

business man wearing out his city clothes. He felt very much the head of the family.

'Can't you give 'em a good biff, these notes of yours? Loosen them a bit?' he suggested; and Judy said she supposed piano playing had to be left to people who could do it. Nothing, for instance, would make her any good at gym. She couldn't climb a rope to save her life and she didn't want to. Evidently Karen was the same about music.

This struck a spark out of Karen and did her more good than any sympathy.

'Yes, but I'm going to be one of the people who *can* do it. I am,' she cried, and choked down her sobs. She might be flattened out by Mr James but she wasn't going to be by Judy.

Meg was the most helpful. She said that perhaps it was like the overhand serve which she was busily practising ready for next summer. You got better at it just when you never thought you could. She had got hers into the court twice running, and a month ago she was hitting them all over the place. Perhaps Karen's fingers would turn out like that. Karen said perhaps they would and began to feel slightly better.

The very next day was Wednesday.

She first of all made up her mind not to go to the parish hall again. Ever. Then she thought she might perhaps go and see Miss Hemans and perhaps try something over on the little piano. Nothing, nothing on earth was going to induce her to touch the big one again. She put her books down and walked soberly and slowly down the street. It was twenty minutes to one instead of ten minutes past twelve by the time she reached the hall.

She found Miss Hemans waiting for her with a rather

larger piece of toffee than usual. She had opened the grand piano and put the pile of parish magazines on the stool. The little piano in the kitchen was again piled with cups and saucers.

'I 'aven't 'ad my "Drink" for a long, long time,' she said. 'Must 'ave my "Drink." You play it to me, lovey. You can't 'ave me goin' thirsty, can you?'

Miss Hemans had made a joke, the first time she had ever been heard to do such a thing. Karen sat down and began. After a joke like that she could do nothing else.

The summer term came and all through it she spent an hour on Wednesday mornings and as much of Saturday mornings as she could bear, practising on the big piano. Her hands ached till she could have cried. Between the knuckles of her fourth and fifth fingers there was a red-hot pain that came after five minutes of it.

'It's terrible, terrible, *terrible!*' she burst out to Derry James when he looked in one day to see, he said, whether she was wearing out the piano.

He only grinned.

'Shows you want it, my infant. All the same, stop the moment it hurts. Play with each hand separately and hang down the one you're not using as if it was dead. Try. It soon bucks up again.'

Karen tried. It did buck up marvellously quickly.

'That's the stuff. You're getting down to it. I can see the difference. Honest, I can.'

Karen beamed. To get that out of Mr James, who *knew*, was worth anything.

'You ought to be an organist,' he went on. 'Then you 'd have to work your feet too.'

'Your feet?'



'Yes, there's another keyboard below for them to play. I had an old village organ to practise on when I was a kid. It had pedals like a treadmill. I used to yell with it.'

'How old were you?'

'Oh, I don't know. Quite a kid, I suppose. I played a service when I was eleven, feet and all.'

'Eleven! Why, I'm getting on for ten.' Karen was horrified to think how backward she was by comparison. 'You must have been frightfully clever.'

'No,' said Derry airily. 'Music's a thing that comes out young. Bach used to play the organ like a marvel when he was too small to reach the pedals. He ran about on them.' Derry became thoughtful. 'I always wonder how he'd manage rests.'

'Rests? What are rests?'

Derry looked amused.

'The little squiggly things that tell you to take your hands off the piano, my musician. As a matter of fact you seem to keep them all right—the rests, I mean. I suppose that's this ear of yours. It lets you make a shot at pretty well anything, more or less. All the same, it's time you learnt a bit more. You ask your Aunt Anne about rests.'

He fled off, leaving Karen to brood on Bach, who ran about on the pedals playing with his feet and his hands at the same time when he was far, far smaller than herself. Did someone coach him, she wondered, as Meg was coached for her overarm service? She sighed and wriggled with awful impatience. When was someone going to turn up to coach her? Someone like Derry James who really knew.

Then, like an answer from the skies, the summer holidays came again and brought with them—Rosalba.

## CHAPTER V

### THE PIANO AT BRENT HILL

‘WHAT luck we ’re having. Listen to this.’

Mrs Forrest beamed on her family sitting round the breakfast table and read her letter aloud.

Someone was lending them a vicarage, a lovely vicarage with a garden and a tennis court in a village in Somerset. They were to spend the whole of the summer holidays there.

‘Isn’t it lovely? Change of air and real country. D’you hear that, Biddy? Real country.’

Biddy, bringing in the porridge, said she was glad to think of it. She was sick to death of streets. She was dying for the feel of grass under her feet.

‘I ’m jumpin’ mad for it,’ she said, ‘and the smell of a cow.’

The family all sympathized with that. They often felt the same way themselves.

‘Well, Somerset is very nearly as green as Ireland,’ said Mrs Forrest, ‘and it ’s full of cows.’

‘All smelling like anything, you bet,’ added Ralph.

‘And we ’ll have picnics every day and never think of the time.’

‘Is it time?’ Biddy groaned. ‘These meals that had to be on the stroke or the children were late for school! They were a nightmare to her. ‘The devil ’s surely in the clock and me strivin’ with it always.’

Mrs Forrest laughed and told her that nothing mattered in the holidays, and, anyway, if it wasn’t for her and all

the cooking she did there would be no meals at all, punctual or unpunctual. She was everlastingly grateful to Biddy for sticking to them, even though it meant leaving Ireland.

So down they went to Brent Hill and settled into their summer quarters. It was a nice old house, square and whitewashed, with a great many windows and doors that led into the garden. The gardener, who was called Martin, turned out to be a friendly, sociable sort of person who kept the tennis court beautifully and brought in fruit and vegetables, as good as McGuire's store, as Biddy told him. The garden was full of flowers, and Judy spent blissful hours filling the enormous vases. Ralph, instructed by Martin, found somewhere to fish—he had brought his father's rod from Glenamoyle—and when he was not doing that he was making the fourth for tennis. Meg could hold her own with Judy now, and he could sometimes beat his mother, so they made an even game.

They were occupied and out of the house all day long and that suited Karen down to the ground. She did not intend to fish or play tennis. Five minutes in the house had shown her what she wanted. The only thing that mattered to her was an empty drawing-room.

When they had arrived they had run all over the house examining every corner, choosing their bedrooms, gazing at the pictures, looking out of the windows. No one had found the drawing-room at all interesting. It was a large, white-walled room with nothing much in it except a sofa and a couple of chairs covered with faded rose chintz. Mrs Forrest looked at it and said 'Good. Exactly what I had hoped. Everything put

away and old covers. Old as the hills. You can't possibly do any harm here—that's one thing.'

'Pretty awful,' pronounced Judy. 'But we'll ginger it up with flowers. Heaps of flowers.'

Meg hardly glanced at it. 'Anyhow we're going to be out of doors,' she said, and darted out into the garden through the room's french windows.

'I think it's a *heavenly* room,' cried Karen.

'That's right, darling,' said her mother, a little surprised. 'I think it's altogether a heavenly house.' And she and Judy went away on their exploring, leaving Karen to her heavenly room.

They hadn't noticed, they hadn't any of them noticed, the piano.

It stood against the wall, a blue rug over it; not a huge grand like the churchwarden's, nor an upright like Aunt Anne's, nor a little cottage like the kitchen one, but another size, a small kind of grand that Karen had not seen before. She ran to the keyboard in sudden terror. Supposing it was locked. No, the lid came up and she sighed with relief. The notes were beautifully white and black—nothing old and dim about them. It looked as inviting as a pool of cool water on a hot day. She slid on to the stool and plunged in. Oh, if only she could make the heavenly ripples and runs that ran off Derry's fingers so easily. However, there was a bit of a Schubert impromptu she was getting quite fairly fast—she would try that. The seat was much too low and she looked round for something to sit on. There were no parish magazines, but beside her stood a music cabinet, rather like Aunt Anne's only much bigger. On the bottom shelf was a good stack of bound volumes and she found the Mozart violin and piano sonatas;

with a cushion they made her exactly right. She could spare the violin sonatas. Everything else in the cabinet she intended to play. Everything.

'That 's me wee hairo!' cried Biddy, who came in at that moment just in time to hear her resolution. 'More power to ye. There 's nothin' would rise your heart like a tune. Will ye give me one?'

She was given one and her astonishment knew no bounds. She had not heard Karen play since the day they had penetrated into the parish hall together. Miss Hemans—the old dirge, as she always called her—was an annoying person in her black hat and her clean apron, and the thought of seeing her again kept her away from the hall. Six months' practice, a good deal of it on the big piano which Derry had a pleasant habit of leaving unlocked, had done marvels.

'Och, listen to ye leapin' and hittin',' she cried, 'and the tune runnin' away from ye like water.' Full of excitement, she ran shrieking for Mrs Forrest and Judy to come and listen. Ralph appeared round the door; Meg came in from the garden; and Karen played her impromptu again, as fast as she possibly could.

'Heard ye ever the like o' that!' cried Biddy triumphantly, as pleased as if she had done it herself. 'Wasn't I sayin' playin' came as aisy to her as fleas to a dog's back?'

She needn't have troubled. They were all impressed and astonished beyond measure. A more completely unmusical collection of people, with the exception, perhaps, of Biddy, it would have been hard to find. They had had no practice in listening and could hardly distinguish one tune from another, however different they might be. There had been plenty of music to hear

in the last fifteen months, and, having ears, they had heard it; but as an indistinguishable blurr, as one hears the sound of traffic. Mrs Forrest had set her face firmly against a radio. It was quite the last thing she meant to afford. Four children and two grown-ups in a very small house made all the noise they needed, she said, and *The Times* gave her as much information as she could bear. Music at home, music that one made oneself, they had, none of them, ever dreamt of.

And here was Karen, the youngest of the family, sitting at a piano as if it belonged to her.

'Where did you pick it up?' asked the mystified Ralph. Evidently you picked up music as you picked up a language.

'I've been practising.'

'But you said the notes or something were so heavy you couldn't do it,' said Judy, remembering the unhappy lunch.

'I know. But I did in the end.'

'Didn't she keep at it with the old dirge of a caretaker lettin' on she was sick with the noise of it, and not one hearing her, only meself.'

Poor old Hemsey! But Karen let Biddy's untruthful remark go because, after all, she had had the idea of the parish hall originally. She played something more, and they all sat on the edges of their chairs trying to listen like a real audience. After that they had had enough.



'Good egg,' Ralph said amiably, and slipped through the window. The others all made kind remarks as they left. Karen was in a dream of delight. No concert in later years was as important as that one, that woke her family to the fact that she played the piano. That performance was a success; it gave her something she wanted, a certain respect for her music. They wouldn't mind her staying indoors to play now; they wouldn't be crushing any more because she didn't want to learn to play tennis. One day she would, but not these holidays when, for the first time in her life, she was living—not just spending one night as with Aunt Anne, but living—with a piano.

After that the family heard her tinkling away for hours together and got a certain perplexed pleasure out of it. To hear Karen 'at it' was like hearing the rooks cawing—part of the glorious summer. It was amazing that she could want to do it, but there it was, she did.

Ralph, as a matter of fact, had a serious talk to his mother about her when they were looking over the accounts together. Now that he was older he had a good deal to say about finance.

'Fairly swots, doesn't she?' he said. 'She seems as keen as mustard. These hols are being rather cheap with all the vegetables and things, don't you think we might run to lessons for her?'

Mrs Forrest shook her head doubtfully.

'A little later on we might, but the worst of it is, it means a piano too. Lessons are no good without a piano to practise on. I think Aunt Anne is enough till we can see our way to that, don't you?'

Ralph most certainly thought so. He was staggered at the idea of buying a piano. It seemed to him the most

appalling waste of money when money was pretty tight, as it was with them. He was getting a remove next term and so was Judy. Both of them would want new books, lots of books. Also he had grown out of all his footer things and with a chance for the second eleven he had to have decent ones. Karen's music, which was not quite a lesson and not quite a game, was definitely an 'extra,' something that could be done without.

'Better let the kid rip then,' he said. 'We shan't have money for pianos till I get a job. She's not ten yet. There's heaps of time for extras like that.'

Heaps of time. If Karen could have heard that it would, in Biddy's phrase, have had her destroyed. The one thing she was certain about was her great age. Nearly double figures. Terribly old to be only playing odds and ends out of any music book she could pick up. There was nothing, nothing at all, she could play through from beginning to end.

This was borne in upon her after she had come upon a book in her room, a life of Mozart. She had taken it down to read because the name was familiar to her as the composer whose violin and piano sonatas she sat on. The account of his childhood she found more engrossing, more fantastic, than any fairy tale she had ever read, but she put it down feeling that a weight of years had descended on her head. 'Wolfgang'—he was blessed with an entrancing name that brought to her mind packs of wolves trotting with glittering eyes through dark forests—'Wolfgang learnt this minuet and trio in half an hour, at half past nine at night, on 26th January 1761, one day before his fifth year.' Written like that in his father's handwriting on a piece of music they still kept, apparently, in a museum, it was impossible not



to believe it to be true. How could he have learnt it in half an hour? And what was he doing out of bed at half past nine at night on the day before his fifth birthday? No one would have allowed her, Karen, to stay up, let alone taught her a minuet and trio, at that age. He had started for a concert tour, this Wolfgang, when he was six. Karen was a little vague as to what a concert tour might be, but she read the list of grand people before whom he performed. He played the organ to some Franciscan friars on that trip and she wondered whether he ran up and down on the pedals like Bach and what he did for the rests. (She had taken Derry's advice and found out all about rests.) At Vienna he had saved his father's custom-house duties by playing to the officers. All this before he was seven. And she had been eight before ever she put her hands on a piano.

She was considering these depressing facts one day as she strolled in the little wood at the back of the vicarage. The wood had a broad path running through it that led to a five-barred gate and so to the house it belonged to. The house was empty, and Martin had said they might treat the wood as their own. Had Karen had any attention to spare she would have seen that it was a lovely little wood, the kind that has something to give at every season of the year. In spring the primroses lay, clotted like Devonshire cream, with the chilly sun glinting on them through the trees; after them came the dusky bluebells; and, later still, regiments of foxgloves.

But Karen was taking no notice of the wood or any of its interesting inhabitants. She was gazing at her spread fingers that even now could not stretch an octave. How could the five-year-old Wolfgang have played his

chords? And even if his piano was as loose as the one in the hall kitchen that Derry had said was like a bag of nuts, even then how did he manage his runs? She was asking herself these perplexing questions when, cutting through the summer sounds of the wood as an oboe cuts through an orchestra, there came the sound of music. *Music*. Rather mysterious music. It was someone playing the piano—the *piano* . . .

She took to her heels and ran down the path.



## CHAPTER VI

### MUSIC IN THE DISTANCE

THE gate at the end of the path which had always been shut now stood open. The padlock had been taken away. Someone new was about. The people who belonged to the empty house must be back; it must be one of them playing the piano. That was it. What was more, he or she was playing Aunt Anne's pet intermezzo in Op. 117—and playing it much too fast. Karen was scandalized at the pace at which it was taken. A thicket of shrubs cut off all view of the house like a green wall, and, lured into the laurels by the music as sailors are lured on to the rocks by the singing of mermaids, she plunged into it, determined to hear better.

The hedge was a good deal deeper than she expected. She crawled for some time under the branches before she found herself close to the house. Beautifully hidden by the close thick leaves, she settled down to listen properly. The intermezzo went through again, faster still, and with, Karen noticed, Aunt Anne's scurry over the difficult bits where the thumbs got in each other's way. Only she always stopped and groaned, whereas this person slid over it and hurried on to the last piece in the book, a lovely mysterious thing that she and Aunt Anne adored and endlessly discussed. They could neither of them be said to *play* it, but Aunt Anne sketched it in her

own satisfying way and Karen, after playing the first three lines (without the octaves) pursued the tune wherever she could find it. They both had strong views about the ending where the idea, Aunt Anne said, blossomed and died in one chord—a wonderful chord that she *pressed* out of the piano in a way that never failed to give Karen a thrill.

What would it be like now? She crept nearer. Then a storm of barking and scurrying paws, swishing of leaves and crackling of dead wood assailed her. No one liked dogs better than Karen; they had had two in Ireland, and were always besieging their mother to let them have one again. All the same, all fours is no position in which to meet a dog for the first time; your head and the dog's are on the same level, and that does not do unless you have already made friends. She stood up—and at once became visible.

'Hallo. I say, Rosalba, there's a small boy in the bushes.'

The hearty voice belonged to a large, cheerful lady in flowery pink, with fair hair in shining waves as beautifully even as corrugated paper. Karen could see her distinctly through the leaves. The dog had gone off in another direction, having, as a matter of fact, disturbed the kitchen cat who was also listening to the music.

The intermezzo went its sombre way.

'She doesn't care who's in the bushes. That's the awful result of music. But I do. Come out and let me see you. Are you a boy, or what?'

'I'm not a boy,' said Karen, and stepped out.

The green linen shorts in which Meg had brought honour to the family had been copied for herself and Judy in blue. With them she wore a scarlet shirt with

short sleeves that Biddy had made for her out of the bit of turkey twill left over from the kitchen curtains.

'Whatever you are,' said the lady, 'whether a boy or an elf, you might as well tell me what you are doing in my garden.'

The chord was coming. The melody was sounding for the last time, slower, more softly, fading . . . ready to die in that last chord. For the life of her Karen could not spare a thought for anything else. 'Hush!' she breathed, involuntarily, and held up her hand for quiet.

The lady in pink stared at her.

'You don't mean to say that at your age you're a music looney too?'

The chord came and went. It was nothing; ineffectual, casual as a passer-by.

'Oh!' cried Karen, acutely disappointed.

'What's the matter?'

'We don't end it at all like that.'

'Oh, don't we? Who's "we"?''

'Aunt Anne and me.'

Another voice, a charming, languid, complaining voice came through the window.

'Darling Daphne, who are you talking to? You're very disturbing.'

'Sorry. I've got a child here.'

'Then take it away. I'm practising.'

'I don't know that it will go. It has views about the ending of that last thing. It doesn't play it like that itself, it says.'

'What?'

It was a tall woman in dark-blue trousers with a top garment like nothing Karen had ever seen before,

composed of all the colours of the rainbow. She strolled out of the window, cigarette in hand. She had dark hair that rolled away from her spacious forehead, bright unsmiling eyes, and wonderful scarlet lips. Karen fell in love with her at sight. She thought her, simply, the most beautiful creature she had ever seen.

‘She and—Aunt Anne, is it?—take it differently. That is so, isn’t it?’

The lady called Daphne introduced them in this curious oblique way.

Karen longed to dive back into the laurels. What on



earth had she said? How could she have dared to say anything?

'I . . . I only meant . . .' she began.

'Differently? How differently?'

'Now don't be crushing, Rosalba,' said Daphne. "We don't end it at all like that" is what the child said—what's your name, by the way?'

'Karen.'

'Oh, then you are a girl. You might be anything.'

'Rather a duck. All red and blue like a monkey on a stick,' said Rosalba. 'Come inside, Karen, and play it to me and show me what you mean.'

'I c—can't, I c—can't. I didn't mean I could *play* it—' stammered Karen.

'You must have meant something. Come along.' Rosalba held out her hand with a smile.

In a dream of unearthly delight Karen was led to the piano, a grand as big as the churchwarden's. Her shyness gave way to an enormous confidence. None of her family were there to see that she was kept within bounds. She found herself, quite drunk with excitement, playing and talking.

Like Aunt Anne she sketched the ending of the intermezzo, trying to get it deep and soft as she did in spite of not being able to stretch the octaves.

'Slower and slower . . . quieter and quieter . . . but *strong*. Then here's the chord . . . *now* . . . good . . . bye.'

The two ladies were surprised and amused. The little thing played as vehemently as she talked.

'Do you and Aunt Anne play the first intermezzo too?' inquired Daphne.

'Yes, we do. But slower.'

And Karen, now quite above herself, sketched it in too, quite incorrectly, of course, but in a definite way of her own.

'I can't play it yet,' she said, confidentially. 'I'm saving it up for when I can stretch an octave. But that's how it goes.'

'H'm . . . rather slower than I played it,' said Rosalba.

'Much slower,' said Karen, kindly.

Daphne laughed.

'Go on, professor. Give us some more.'

It was wonderful. Never before had she played her odds and ends to people who could recognize them. Her memory was well stored with the scraps that Aunt Anne had provided her with, even if she could only play them with one hand, a few bars of melody, a progression, slow passages out of any symphony, concerto, song, that had caught and held her affection. It was heaven to find Rosalba labelling her tunes with their right names and getting quite excited over it.

'That's a phrase out of the Mendelssohn concerto—that's the *Sandman*, that little song of Brahms—that's the bit the cellos play in the Fifth. Oh, listen, Daphne, she's playing that *beautiful* tune out of the Beethoven concerto—'

'Yes,' said Karen gravely. 'Aunt Anne says it's a heavenly tune.' She felt entirely their equal.

'Play something ordinary now. A piece,' commanded Daphne, and she gave them some of the *Kinderscenen*, *Curious Story*, *Rocking Horse*, which she had always loved, and *The Bogey Man*.

'Now here's one we play our own way. It's called *A Poet Speaks*. Aunt Anne says he's speaking real poetry.'



Her repertoire seemed inexhaustible.

'How do you remember them?'

Rosalba asked this question as if she really wanted to know.

Karen, puzzled, said she didn't know. No special way, she thought.

'Do you visualize it?'

'She has no idea what you mean,' said Daphne.

Rosalba explained further.

'Do you see the music in your head? Do you know it's the top of the page? Or that it's where you turn over? Or anything like that? D'you remember the look of it?'

'No.'

'Leave her alone, Rosalba. You might as well ask her how she breathes,' said Daphne.

Rosalba turned on her irritably.

'I want to find out how she does it, I tell you. You know what an awful memory I have. It ruins everything for me. Do you *think* of the tune, Karen?'

Karen, anxious to oblige, said it was like remembering the story of Cinderella or anything like that. You just remembered.

'Exactly,' said Daphne, and Rosalba groaned.

'Shall I stop?' asked Karen politely, but Rosalba said no, it was interesting. Aunt Anne must possess a perfect library of music.

'Yes,' said Karen proudly. 'She has a pile of it beside the piano with the Beethoven sonatas on top to keep it steady.'

'But the scores? All these tunes out of symphonies and concertos and things that she's taught you.'

'Oh, those. We don't have music for *them*.'

Rosalba seemed surprised at that and Karen amplified.

'Aunt Anne remembers them and plays them, and then I play them and remember them.'

Rosalba went to the piano and played a phrase—it was out of the Grieg concerto—with one hand.

'There. Now you see if you can play it.'

Karen, feeling immensely pleased with herself, did so.

'My goodness,' said Daphne.

'Oh, you lucky, lucky, *lucky* child!' cried Rosalba, and a thrill of pure pleasure ran down Karen's spine.

Then, suddenly, a short square man came into the room and shattered her bliss with 'Hallo, you two. Music fug? You ought to be playing tennis, both of you.'

'You shut up, darling,' said Daphne. 'It's an infant prodigy, and you don't know anything about it.'

'Nor do you, sweet. You're only putting it on. Isn't she, Rosalba?'

Rosalba, who had been half lying, engulfed in a huge chair close to the piano, uncoiled herself and stood up.

'I don't know. She found Karen.'

The square man had nice twinkling eyes behind thick glasses. He turned them on Karen and said: 'That's you, is it? Where did you spring from?'

Karen murmured something about being in the wood.

'She's a wood elf. That's what she is,' said Daphne. 'I'd been wondering. Come again, Elf, but I expect now you ought to go home to bed.'

'Yes, but where is her bed?'

'In the tulips, or something suitable like that.'

'In the vicarage,' said Karen, anxious to end this conversation.

'Oh, of course.' He looked at her with interest. 'I remember there were to be children.'

'Four.'

'And where do you come?'

'Bottom.'

Rosalba, lighting a cigarette, broke in.

'Let her play you something, Robert.'

'All right. Fire away.'

Sudden terror shook Karen. If only she could please this man who seemed to want to turn her out of Paradise. No artiste ever looked at an audience with more agonizing inquiry and entreaty than Karen as she went back to the piano. She would never be asked to come again if he didn't like her playing. What should she choose?

He reminded her of Mrs Bent. With a flash of inspiration she sat down and dashed into *Tea for Two* with the energy of a brass band.

It was a great success. He was enchanted. In a moment he had first Rosalba and then his wife round the waist, dancing round the room. He even, when it was done, produced a box of chocolates—the band's supper, he said—and presented it to her. That tangible result of her evening sent Karen dancing home. She was to be sure and come again at the same time to-morrow, they called after her, as she ran through the now darkening wood.

'That's a very remarkable child,' said Robert when she had gone. 'She plays dance music so that you can dance.'

## CHAPTER VII

### MUSIC AT HOME

THE box of chocolates helped matters, of course, but she was exceedingly late. She had been gone for hours, it seemed. Like the sailors on the mermaid's rock, she had lost all count of time.

Biddy gave her one of what she called her old-fashioned looks, a very knowing, very inquiring stare, as she ran through the door.

'It be night and dark night——' she began, but Karen dashed past her and into the dining-room where they had long finished supper.

'Darling, where *have* you been?' cried her mother, with a mixture of relief and annoyance. 'I've been so anxious.'

'Look here, you're too much of a kid to be out at all hours like this. We aren't taking any,' said Ralph in his most severe voice. 'I've been out three times hunting for you. We're simply fed up——'

'I've not been out—I mean out of doors,' panted Karen, and produced the chocolates. They were beauties, in a pale pink box. Three layers, some in gold and silver paper. It was the sort of box that would make a sensation even at Christmas time.

'Crikey! Where did you get that?' cried Ralph. But he was mollified. Any brother would have been.

Where had she been? The worst of it was she had come back supplied with only the most meagre information. She didn't know Robert's name or Daphne's or



even her lovely Rosalba's. She didn't know if the house belonged to all or none of them. She didn't know what sort of dog it was that barked at her. She didn't know if there was a tennis court. She had not, in fact, any useful information at all.

All her family had an uncomfortable feeling that she had been showing off, playing the blessed piano too long, too loud, too fast.

'Did you ask the Rosalba one to play to you?' inquired Judy, ready to disapprove.

'No. No, I didn't,' confessed Karen; and had instantly the dreadful certainty that it was a thing she ought to have done.

'Oh, darling, you should have,' murmured her mother. 'People like it.'

'Of course they do,' said Judy. 'You say: "Do play

me something"; and when they've done you say: "Thank you, who 's it by"; and then you play if you're asked. *If you're asked*, and not otherwise.'

'Did you play all the time?' demanded Ralph, and she had to confess she had. All the time.

'But you were there hours.'

'I know.'

'Good Lord.'

They hadn't seemed tired of her. They had asked her to go on. She couldn't expect the family to believe that, of course. She didn't tell them about Robert's dancing; it would sound funny. And yet what a triumph it had been! He was so ready to be bored when Rosalba said 'Let her play you something.' She could see it. But she ought to have asked Rosalba to play. She went to bed very annoyed with herself about that. It was curious that she hadn't thought of it because she

was always dragging Aunt Anne in from the garden or down from upstairs to get a particular bit of music out of her, something new or something she wanted again. She resolved to ask Rosalba to play the very first moment she could — but not, she decided with her last waking thought, not her darling Op. 117.



Next morning brought Daphne, whose name turned out to be Mrs Fergusson, and a cocker spaniel. Karen had an agonizing moment when they arrived.

Supposing the family didn't get on with her. Supposing she didn't like them. Supposing she was never allowed to go to the house again. Supposing—but it was all right. Meg happened to be hitting a tennis ball against the wall near the gate, practising her back-hand. Her green linen shorts were clean that morning, and she happened to have had her hair washed. Karen, looking out of the window, was pleased to see her fling down her racket and throw her arms round the spaniel's neck; there's nothing like a dog for making successful introductions.

By the time she came downstairs Biddy was at the door talking politely—and she could be very polite when she chose. She'd away and fetch the mistress, she said. Hadn't they all enjoyed the chocolates and heard about the grand music. 'Karen came dancin', the way she'd been left a fortune, but sure she's the girl for the great wee stories anyway, and we'd not be believin' it all.'

Mrs Forrest was in the garden getting the scarlet runners for dinner and they all went off to find her, picking up Ralph and Judy on the way. The twins were a success with Mrs Fergusson. Meg was a success. Her mother was a success. Benjie, the spaniel, ran from one to the other in an ecstasy of welcome. He was a success, too. An invitation to tea and tennis. 'Karen is coming anyway to play the piano to Rosalba' clinched it. They were all going to be friends.

And a glorious fact emerged from the conversation. Rosalba, it appeared, lived at Clifton, practically Bristol. She might be seen again, even when the holidays were over.

The Fergusson's scarlet runners were late and poor, the vicarage ones were magnificent. They picked Mrs Fergusson a basketful and escorted her, all four

of them, to the gate at the edge of the wood, promising to be back at three o'clock sharp for tennis. Karen's bucket went up sky-high for having made such friends.

And the afternoon was all right, too. The tennis went well.

'Now then, Karen, introduce us,' said the man with thick spectacles when they arrived. He, it appeared, was Mrs Fergusson's husband.

Karen did so, giving all their names and also their ages because she had found that, sooner or later, all grown-ups had to be told how old you were. Often your age was the only thing they wanted to know.

'Ralph and Judy are the twins. They're thirteen—about a fortnight ago. That's Meg. She's eleven. And I'm going to be ten in October.' She put in her own age to save time.

'Good, now we all know,' said Mr Fergusson. 'I'm forty-one, going to be forty-two in November, Daphne is——'

Mrs Fergusson broke in with 'Shut up, Robert. How shall we play?'

But Karen caught the eyes of her family. Even Meg was looking at her with a sort of bland warning. Another word and she would be showing off. She retired behind her mother and said she didn't know.

'I'll tell you what we're like,' said Mrs Forrest. 'Judy and Meg are about the same. Meg's smaller but Judy serves masses of faults. Ralph and I are about the same. We're all pretty poor, but when we have family fours the set goes on all night.'

That seemed very convenient. They began to arrange



a game and Karen slipped away into the house to find the piano. Rosalba was waiting for her.

'Oh, please will you play me something,' she said quickly.

Rosalba sat down, smiling, and responded with a wonderful crash of chords, sudden and sharp like jagged rocks, from the top of the piano to the bottom. That, she said, came in the Grieg concerto, a thing she was going to play at a concert with an orchestra.

Karen listened, spellbound. She had no idea what a concerto was and felt rather vague as to the meaning of the word orchestra; all she knew was she had never heard anything like it. Rosalba played some more, including the phrase she had tried her with the day before, and then went on to little pieces by the same composer that she said were specially for children. There was no chance to say: 'Thank you, who's it by?' Judy was wrong there. Rosalba, however, didn't seem to miss it.

Altogether it was a successful afternoon. The tennis players went home with a box of balls that had only been used once, and Karen got the book of Grieg pieces as a present, with injunctions to learn *The Watchman's Song* because Mr Fergusson liked it—not so much as *Tea for Two*, perhaps, but quite a lot.

Never had there been such holidays. The gate in the wood was always open and Benjie ran from one house to the other taking his ball to be thrown by whichever family looked most like a game. Karen, practising at the vicarage or running through the wood to find Rosalba and show



her how quickly she could learn, how well she could remember, had never felt so happy in her life.

One day Rosalba came into the room to find her sitting at the piano in floods of tears.

'Darling, what is the matter?' she exclaimed. She had never seen Karen cry.

'Oh, it's so dreadfully sad,' was all she could hear through the sobs.

'What is so dreadfully sad?'

Karen sobbed and pointed to the music. It was the *Moonlight Sonata*. Aunt Anne had played it many a time but she had always told Karen to leave it alone till she was older. Then, there it was, in the cabinet beside the vicarage piano. The notes of the first movement were not difficult, she learnt it easily enough. Now the

beautiful melody, floating above its quiet, changing harmonies, filled her with a dreadful and mysterious misery. It was September; the leaves were turning. Mother was beginning to pack. It rained in torrents. The holidays were over and there would be no piano, no summer, no Rosalba, ever again. It was all in the music. Listen for the questions and answers, Aunt Anne had said, and Karen listened and found them heart-breaking.

All this she tried to explain, crying and talking. Rosalba



understood better than most people. She thought the first movement of that sonata beautiful but certainly not for Karen. She might as well try to read Hamlet.

She put an arm round her.

‘Sweetheart, you are a little silly. If it’s so sad don’t play it.’

‘But I m—m—must. I do love it so and it m—makes me m—miserable,’ Karen sobbed anew.

‘Can’t you play it so that it’s *hopeful*?’

‘Hopeful? How?’

‘So that it tells you you are coming to see me in Clifton and play duets.’

Karen lifted swimming eyes and said how could she? She’d never practise. There was no piano.

‘Rubbish. I’ve got three.’

‘*Three!*’

‘Two in one room and a little Broadwood.’

Such wealth only made Karen feel worse.

‘But I want to go on learning my pieces and playing them to you.’

‘So you shall. You shall learn them on the little piano I’ve got tucked away upstairs in my sitting-room and then come down and play them to me in my studio.’

Thus it was that Rosalba undertook the musical education of Karen for the next year or so.

## CHAPTER VIII

### ROSALBA'S KIND OF MUSIC

'Is she as frightfully good as all that?' inquired Judy one day when Karen had been holding forth about Rosalba's concert and the great piece she was going to play. Karen had now heard the Grieg concerto with the orchestra, played on a gramophone record. Judy wanted to know what it was like and she had been finding it difficult to say. It seemed to rage backwards and forwards; sometimes the piano won, sometimes the orchestra won; sometimes they agreed together like angels. Whatever they either of them did it was gorgeous.

'H'm,' said Judy, unimpressed. 'And you're sure she's going to play the thing?'

'Oh, yes.'

'When?'

That Karen did not know.

'I'm only asking because a girl in my form says Rosalba isn't any good. Her mother told her.'

'Whose mother?'

'The girl's mother. She's jolly hot stuff herself—played a tarantella, or something awfully hard like that, right through at a form concert.'

'The *mother* did?'

'No, idiot, the girl. It was the mother who said Rosalba had had millions of lessons from every one on earth but that she'd never play.'

'But she *does* play.'

Karen flushed scarlet; she could have screamed. They should just listen to that jagged volley of chords that opened the concerto. Every time she heard it she jumped nearly out of her skin. Never play, indeed!

'Can't remember, or something.'

That was unpleasantly true. Rosalba was dreadfully worried about her memory. Dozens of times Karen had known her begin splendidly, in full flood, and then suddenly dry up—not just play a wrong chord or two but stop dead. But no one was ever to know that. It was a deathly secret.

'She's a beast, that girl in your form,' cried Karen, in a rage. 'And a tarantella only means you've been bitten by a spider.'

'She isn't a beast, and I don't believe it about the spider. Actually she's rather nice. And you needn't take the hump either. Your blessed Rosalba wasn't a patch on Mrs Fergusson last summer.'

Karen stormed that she was, and Meg, drawn in, said she was different.

'Different? Of course she's different. The music makes her different,' agreed Karen with angry fervour.

'Well, don't let's have any music making *you* different, that's all. I don't know what happens to your homework but all I know is that you never seem to be doing it.'

With that Judy went off to light the gas fire in her bedroom and settle down to an hour of French composition. She was taking her Junior School Certificate and feeling very earnest about it.

It was nearly the end of the autumn term. Karen had had a blissfully happy time since they came back

from Brent Hill. Rosalba's home was only the length of a street away, and she was continually there. Five minutes of kicking through the red rustling horse-chestnut leaves that floated down all through October brought her to the side door that took her to the back stairs and so up into the little sitting-room which was, at the moment, her idea of heaven. It was Rosalba's sitting-room, but she was never there. The cottage piano had stood dumb for years. No one came near it and Karen could play to her heart's content without disturbing a soul.

It was an awe-inspiring house. She never got used to it. Every time she opened the door, quiet as a mouse, and scuttled away up the stairs it was an adventure. If she got there, as she

generally did, without seeing any of the fearfully grand servants, she was happy for the rest of the day.

Of course Rosalba was different. The more Karen saw of her in her wonderful studio the more marvellous she thought her. Lessons were generally after tea when the creamy curtains were drawn and the fire, much bigger than any other fire, licked up and down the pale walls in darting shadows. Rosalba liked playing in a half light.



The first time Karen had seen that studio she was so alarmed by it that she nearly ran home. Old Mrs Mersey-White cackled with rather sour laughter when Karen told her that. She was Rosalba's mother, an elderly lady who seemed much older than she really was because she was an invalid who spent most of the day on a sofa in her bedroom. She laughed, but she was not at all pleased.

'And to think of all the money I've spent on that room,' she said.

'Oh, but it's lovely, *lovely*,' cried Karen, who was quick to know when she had said the wrong thing.

'D' you know it's three rooms knocked into one and then a great bay built out for the Steinway.'

'Oh, yes, mor'n three,' agreed Karen, anxious to make amends.

'No, three. My drawing-room, my boudoir, and the morning-room.' There was a pause, then a question. 'You're the youngest of your family, aren't you?'

'Yes.'

'Rosalba is the youngest of mine. The youngest is always spoilt.'

'Oh, no, she isn't,' cried Karen.

'Isn't she?' Mrs Mersey-White seemed amused. 'Well, mine was. Was and is. I like spoiling her. That music-room——'

'Studio.'

'Studio—I always forget she likes it called a studio as if she was a painter—that studio is the right setting for her genius. Don't you think so?'

'Oh, yes,' cried Karen enthusiastically.

'I'm totally unmusical myself—I'm the sort of person who only knows *God Save the King* because you stand up.

I don't pretend to know, but I've always been told Rosalba is very wonderful. She played the *Wedding March* at her eldest sister's wedding.'

'Did she?'

'Only with one finger, of course, but every one recognized it at once. In her bridesmaid's dress. I don't think she was more than six or seven at the time.'

A vision of Wolfgang on the eve of his fifth birthday loomed into Karen's mind to be instantly swept out again. Of course it was wonderful to have played the tune of the *Wedding March* with one finger. Pom—pom—perompompom—it started itself and hummed in her mind while the old lady went on talking about Rosalba. She was so much younger than any of the others and so very much better looking, besides being so clever. And was Karen enjoying her lessons? Of course she was. And was she getting on well?

'Oh, yes,' cried Karen, happily. 'I'm getting on well. I am getting on *well*.'

She felt she was. Rosalba said she was wonderful for her age so she must be. Whatever Rosalba said must be right. Sometimes she went back to the parish hall to practise, partly to see Hemsey but chiefly in the hope that Derry would come in and find her practising and say: 'You're getting on *well*, aren't you?' Hemsey said she was a treat to listen to, but then darling Hemsey was so easily pleased. It would be something to impress Derry. He had said: 'I see a difference. Honest, I do,' last time. What would he say now?

Certainly she could gallop through an enormous number of pieces. She was through the side door and up the stairs to Rosalba's room at a quarter past twelve every morning and again most afternoons. Her fingers



were getting really stronger. And Rosalba was very generous in giving her music. She presented her with the Beethoven Sonatas, the Chopin Preludes, Schubert's Impromptus, most of the Grieg short pieces—dozens of things, easy and difficult. And what was more, she had them bound in blue leather with 'Karen' in gold letters on the cover, as if it was she who was the composer.

'H'm, she must be rich, this Rosalba of yours,' said Aunt Anne, when Karen proudly showed them to her.

She still went to Aunt Anne's on Saturday afternoons. The others were always busy now. Ralph had his second fifteen footer match. Judy had her Guides. Meg, now in the Upper Third, was rapidly becoming a good games player who generally had a match of some kind. They were all out of the house by half-past two. Biddy, who liked that day to herself, approved of all their affairs. 'They're great children altogether,' she said, 'and they never darkening the door again till I've the tea wetted for them it might be six.' Karen, now that she was ten, was allowed to go in the bus alone, and off she went, happy as any of them, her latest new piece tucked under her arm.

'Rich! I should just think she was. She's got two pianos in the studio, a Steinway and a Bechstein, and she's got a Broadwood upstairs. She plays on the Steinway and I play on the Bechstein.'

'What? Together?'

'Sometimes together.'

'Heaven help you.'

That was Rosalba's method of teaching. Karen played whatever she was learning and Rosalba, on the

other piano, broke in at intervals, crying: 'No, no! Not like *that*, like this,' and played it herself. Generally there was only one copy of the music between them, so Karen did without. Her memory became exceedingly inaccurate, but exceedingly serviceable. She could get through her piece by heart after a week or two's practice, splashing happily along in Rosalba's wake.

Aunt Anne was difficult to impress.

'H'm. She ought to make you keep your foot off the pedal,' was all she said, after Karen had performed her latest. 'And why, may I ask, don't you sit still?'

Rosalba acted her music, so to speak, in a way Karen found quite entrancing. Before she began to play she would roll her handkerchief into a ball and clench her fingers on it so that the knuckles shone white. Then she would put it reverently at the side of the keyboard and wring her hands together. That, she said, was because she was highly-strung. The palms of her hand were wet, soaking wet, with nervous tension. After that she played a few chords and ran up and down the piano in an arpeggio. That, she explained, was to get the acoustics of the hall. Presumably they varied from hour to hour because she never failed to do this, even in her own room. Then, ready to begin, she would look up to the ceiling, as if invoking the aid she needed, and down at her hands, as if adjuring them to do their best. At last she came to the opening bars. Every mood, every change in the music blew her from side to side, swaying her like a slender tree in a storm. Sometimes, in a soft passage, her head would stoop till it was close to her hands; sometimes she shook it gently, commiseratingly, full of pity. The expression of her face changed; it darkened, lightened; almost she scowled, almost she

smiled. Karen used to say to herself that she could tell what she was playing by watching her even if she heard nothing. It was wonderful; almost as interesting and beautiful as the music itself. Naturally she did her best to imitate every detail as exactly as she could.

Aunt Anne, knitting by the fire, was wearing her watchful parrot expression.

'What do you go screwing up your poor handkerchief like that for? You're making it very dirty.'

'It's for my nervous tension,' replied Karen.

'Your *what*?'

Unable to explain further, Karen took refuge in: 'That's what Rosalba said.'

An enormous sniff shook Aunt Anne from stem to stern.

'And this——' Karen ran up the piano in a jerky arpeggio with a pert little chord at the top. 'This is to get the acrostics before playing in public.'

'Oh, is it?' A wintry smile played over Aunt Anne's features. 'Mrs Bent is rather good at acrostics, too.'

Karen, deeply offended, said that Rosalba's were quite a different kind from Mrs Bent's, and frightfully important to an artist.

'An artist?'

'Rosalba is an artist.' Karen had learnt by now that an artist need have nothing to do with easels. 'And she says I shall be one some day.'

'Oh, I see. I beg your pardon.'

There was a pause during which Aunt Anne knitted and Karen played three of the Mendelssohn *Songs without Words*. Rosalba would never hear them; she laughed at them, calling them little bits of Christmas cards with robins on them. Karen, faithful to an early love,

adored them still, and played them with a feeling and freshness that was all her own.

Aunt Anne laid aside her knitting to listen.

'Really, that's very nice,' she said, when she had done; she could not keep the pleasure out of her voice. 'Very nice. I positively enjoyed you.'

Karen jumped up from the piano.

'Oh, darling Aunt Anne,' she cried, and flung her arms round her neck. She so seldom got any praise from her. It was almost worth Derry's 'I see a difference. Honest, I do.'

'You'd play quite well if only you'd listen to yourself more. Specially to that left hand of yours.'

'I do listen when I'm playing to you.'

It was true. She was very much more careful when playing to Aunt Anne than when playing to Rosalba. Aunt Anne always heard the bass. No amount of gay splashing with the loud pedal hid mistakes from her.

'You ought to give that pedal a month's rest. Still, there it is, this Rosalba of yours has given you perfect confidence in yourself, and that's a very valuable thing to have. Now, listen, Mrs Bent wants you to play at the Women's Institute and I really think you might as well.'

'Oh, I'd love to.'

Karen clasped her hands together ecstatically. Then she thought, and her face fell.

'I don't believe Rosalba will let me.'

'Why on earth not?'

'She'll say I'm not ready.'

'Not ready?' Aunt Anne's voice took an extreme dryness. 'Ready for what?'

'She says no one should appear in public till they're ready—no artist, I mean.'

‘My dear child,’ said Aunt Anne, briskly, ‘your teacher was no doubt referring to herself and other musicians of note. Such a remark can have nothing whatever to do with you. If Mrs Bent’s friends would like to hear you, you ought to be very glad to be allowed to play to them.’

‘I am. I do. I would love it,’ cried Karen, vehemently. She was dying to play but was torn between her desires and what she imagined to be her duty towards Rosalba.

‘Then play when you’re asked, and don’t, for goodness’ sake, *fuss*,’ said Aunt Anne.

## CHAPTER IX

### 'DRINK' SAVES KAREN

So Karen did not fuss but went to the December meeting of the Women's Institute one evening when snow lay thick on the ground.

Meg decided to go with her. They were to go to Sharpset by the afternoon bus and spend the night with Aunt Anne, both of them sleeping in the big bed where Karen had tossed about that first night of all, waiting for the music to draw her downstairs.

Meg was rather late in from school.

'What time do we push off?' she inquired, when she had finished her dinner.

'Soon as you 're dressed and sooner,' said Karen, who was dying to start.

'I am dressed,' said Meg. She was a big child for her age. The barley-sugar hair had been allowed to grow into two long plaits that hung down on either side of her rosy, good-tempered face. She hated anything she called 'dressing-up.'

'But, darling,' said her mother, 'I don't think you ought to go to this in your school clothes.'

'Oh, yes, I ought. I've got a cleanish blouse on and Biddy's done my shoes again.'

'But look at Karen.'

Karen was resplendent in a red velvet dress given her by Rosalba. It was a very pretty frock with short sleeves and a red ruffle in place of a collar. She generally had Judy's or Meg's dresses to wear out so naturally she was



enraptured with it. Never before had she had a frock that came fresh from a shop in a box full of tissue paper. She had cut ten minutes off her precious practising time to get into it as soon as possible.

Meg looked.

‘I’d rather die than wear anything like that,’ she said solemnly. ‘And anyway her vest shows.’

Mrs Forrest, banishing the vest with a safety-pin, tried to argue. ‘But that tunic thing is so dull, and exactly like every one else.’

‘I like it,’ said Meg.

‘Well, I don’t, I don’t, I don’t,’ sang Karen, and skipped blithely round the room. She was going to play the piano with real grown-ups listening. Wolfgang

must have felt just like her when he was doing his concert tour—just like her, dying to begin.

Meg was looking at her sister with mild interest.

'I don't mind it for Karen, but I'm not taking any myself. People dress up to play the piano but not to listen to it.'

'Oh, yes, they do,' retorted Karen. 'Low necks sometimes.'

'Not to listen to people like you.'

Meg had a sledge-hammer directness that would have been crushing in any one else.

Biddy thought it time to finish off the conversation.

'Quit yer blatherin' and be away into yer thick coats. There's a wind blowin' would take the horns off a goat it would.'

They had a great tea with Aunt Anne, making the buttered toast and boiling the kettle themselves. After that they sat by the fire, waiting; Meg buried in an arm-chair, Karen perched on the edge of a stool, her hands in a pair of enormous fur gloves belonging to Rosalba. Mrs Bent had promised to fetch them.

'Are you sure she promised? Oughtn't we to go? What time did she say exactly? Are you sure she meant it?' Karen kept up a flow of questions.

'Quite sure. She said she'd pop across.'

'Pop across?' Meg did not know Mrs Bent very well.

'Yes, pop. And if Mrs Bent says she'll pop anywhere you may be sure she will. She's entirely reliable. Meg and I will have a game of halma till she comes.'

They settled down to their game, Aunt Anne answering Karen's questions while she played.

'Is it like the beginning of a concert tour?'



‘How d’ you mean?’

‘Wolfgang went on a concert tour when he was seven. Would he have played like me to-night?’

‘At a Women’s Institute? No, I don’t think Mozart ever did that.’

And then, at last, Mrs Bent popped in at the door, very out of breath. She was stout, and the younger members of the Institute had insisted on an hour of folk-dancing.

‘Ever so late we are,’ she panted. ‘But a grand turnout. Everybody there. We must ’urry.’

They fled down the hill from Aunt Anne’s to the parish room, the snow crunching and creaking under their feet.

‘Will they clap me, Mrs Bent?’

‘Sure to, lovey.’ And Karen danced ahead, too happy to live.

The busy, kindly secretary met them at the door.

‘Yes, dear, of course we should love to hear you,’ she said, rather vaguely, when Mrs Bent had introduced Karen. ‘Of course we should. Very nice of you to think of it, Mrs Bent. We’ve had the first part of the programme and tea, and now we’re going to finish up with some games because it’s so near Christmas. Will you play your piece while we move the chairs, dear.’

The piano was in an obscure corner of the hall and they made their way over to it as quietly as they could behind the tea-drinkers.

‘I’m afraid it’s rather hot,’ said the secretary. ‘We’ve been dancing. Would you like to remove your coats?’

‘Karen would,’ said Meg firmly, and began to help her off with it. She might not want to wear a red velvet

dress herself but that didn't mean it was to be wasted under a coat.

So Karen sat down at the piano and began. She remembered the handkerchief though the palms of her hands were not at all wet; and she remembered the arpeggios for the acrostics Aunt Anne was so scornful about. She did all the things Rosalba did and then started on one of the *Songs without Words*.

No one paid her the slightest attention.

Some of the members had had an energetic session of folk-dancing, others a hard hour of glove-making; it was now time to relax and have some gossip. Karen was not down in the programme, her piano was not on the platform, no one said anything about her; most of them had not noticed she was there. Someone with a tin tray was collecting cups and saucers for washing up, and every separate piece of china made its own clattering, clinking contribution to the noise as it was set down, cup on cup, saucer on saucer, and carried, rattling, from table to table. Voices had to be raised to cheerful shouts if they were to carry, and conversationalists were generally at opposite ends of the room.

Like a straw on this flood of sound swam Karen's little tune. She finished her piece and Mrs Bent's lips framed, 'Go on, lovey,' with an encouraging smile; her voice could not be heard. After the second of the songs she played a Schubert impromptu, two tears running down her nose and falling with a plop on the keys. She forgot to sway and shake her head. All that mattered was to keep her sobs back and play the right notes.

'I say, Mrs Bent, aren't they going to listen at all?'

Meg was getting anxious. It was awful to see Karen

disgrace herself by tears, but at the same time she was not given to crying, and surely for once she had an excuse—surely it was not right to ask a person to put on a red dress and play the piano and then not listen to a note.

‘Can’t you make them? Can’t you ring a bell or something?’

Mrs Bent shook her head. The secretary was the person to do these things—it didn’t do to interfere; and Mrs Bent could see the secretary at the other end of the hall having her cup of tea at last, and also a hot argument over a pair of gloves. Any one could see it was hot by the way she held them up, pulling at the fingers. It wouldn’t do to interrupt that.



'I can't seem to do nothing,' she said hoarsely, and sat down heavily on a chair behind them, out of sight.

It was nearly time for games and the company began to drag their chairs across the room, arranging them round three sides of the square. They were kitchen chairs, and they made a fine rasping noise as they went along. Some of the livelier members carried two at a time and seldom reached the appointed place without dropping one, or even both, amid much laughter. But at last they settled down, and, because they were waiting to hear what game it was to be, there was a moment's lull. Karen's fingers were running towards the end of her second impromptu, and, suddenly, they heard her. She turned round to see, through a blur of tears, a circle



of faces, all looking towards her. Her piece ended, and, hardly knowing what she was doing, she turned into *Drink*. Surely they'd listen to that. She and Aunt Anne had put a lovely bass to it. She had never met any one who didn't like *Drink*. Even Ralph had got to know it.

Gulping down a sob she began it.

She could not have hit upon anything better. The Institute knew it to a woman. In a moment they were singing at the tops of their voices. When it was done they clapped deafeningly and someone called for *Annie Laurie*. Of course Karen knew that—it was another of Ralph's favourites. They sang it lustily, lingering on the top notes, 'Gie'd me her promise tru—ue, which ne'er forgot shall be—ec,' as if they hated to leave them. After that came *Good King Wenceslas* because of the weather, and under cover of that Meg whispered: 'Now you try them with a piece.'

'Oh, Meg, but *what* piece?' Karen whispered back, playing the while. She daren't let go of her precious audience by playing something they didn't like. Supposing they began to talk again.

Meg suggested the *Merry Peasant*. It was a title that remained in her memory because of the pleasant picture it called up—a little fat man in green shorts and a feather in his hat, dancing gaily, a spade over his shoulder.

'All right,' said Karen, and quavered, in a voice made shrill by anxiety: 'Look out! I'm going to play the *Merry Peasant*.'

They clapped good-naturedly, listened and clapped again; then someone shouted 'encore'—the first time Karen had heard that lovely word.

'That means do it again,' yelled Meg through the noise.

'I will. Oh, I will,' cried Karen, and went on and on, shouts of encore and clapping between each piece, till the secretary stopped her, saying the evening was over, the room was now wanted for the Oddfellows. 'We should all like to thank Miss Karen Forrest, I'm sure, for coming to-night. . . .' and the clapping and clattering of chairs, the good-byes and thank-yous seemed the sweetest of all music in Karen's ears.

Even Aunt Anne's pet sedative, a baked apple, did not make Karen sleep that night. Meg was away in the soundest of slumbers the moment her head touched the pillow, but she lay awake for an hour or more, re-living the evening. It had been terrible, then exciting, then heavenly. But all rather perplexing. Did you never know whether people were going to listen to you or not? Did Wolfgang never know? Did he just go on playing whatever happened, moving chairs or anything else? She wondered, then she remembered something; Wolfgang had never had to play to a Women's Institute.

## CHAPTER X

### AN INVITATION TO LONDON

ONE day Karen came running home, bursting with a piece of news. It was early spring now; the leaves had long been swept up and tidied away and the chestnuts on the road to Rosalba, always the early risers among trees, were already swelling with buds ready for another summer. A tearing March wind whipped the colour into her cheeks and set her dancing. She ran up the steps to the front door and hurled herself into the kitchen, where she found Biddy taking a steaming beefsteak pudding out of its saucepan.

‘Biddy darling, I ’m going to London,’ shrilled Karen.

‘Lord save us, ye ’re growin’, y’ are,’ was Biddy’s reply.

Karen, skipping about the kitchen, suddenly seemed all thin legs and long wrists. She was not the midge of a thing she used to be. Her skirt wanted letting down; she had grown altogether out of her coat.

Karen stopped her jigging.

‘Did you say I was groaning?’

‘I did not.’

‘Because I ’m not. I ’m joyful, joyful, joy—oyful,’ and she started skipping again.

‘Listen, there ’s Ralph coming in. Ra—lph,’ she yelled at the top of her voice.

Ralph slammed his books down on the hall table and came into the kitchen.

'Ralph, I'm going to London,' said Karen, hanging on his arm.

'Get on,' said Ralph. 'Who said so?'

'I did,' said Karen. 'And it's true. Here's Meg.'

Meg stood in the doorway unwinding her scarf and slipping her satchel off her back. Her beret was on the back of her head and her two plaits each ended in a fly-whisk of yellow hair because their ribbons were missing.

'That smells jolly good, Biddy. I'm hungry,' she said.

'And how will ye get a taste of it with all the delay they're making,' said Biddy, with a baleful look at her cabbage.

'Who's making a delay?'

'Begor, isn't it Karen lettin' on she's away out o' this to the king and Ralph believin' her.'

Karen sat on the edge of the kitchen table and swung her legs.

'I've just been telling them I'm going to London,' she said airily.

'You're not!' said Meg, shaken for the moment out of her usual calm.

'Aren't I just.'

'Ye'll please to get out of my kitchen,' said Biddy, 'and me strivin' to get yer dinner.'

No one took the slightest notice of that. They knew Biddy meant nothing of the kind.

Meg perched beside Karen.

'*London!* How exciting. Tell me about it.'

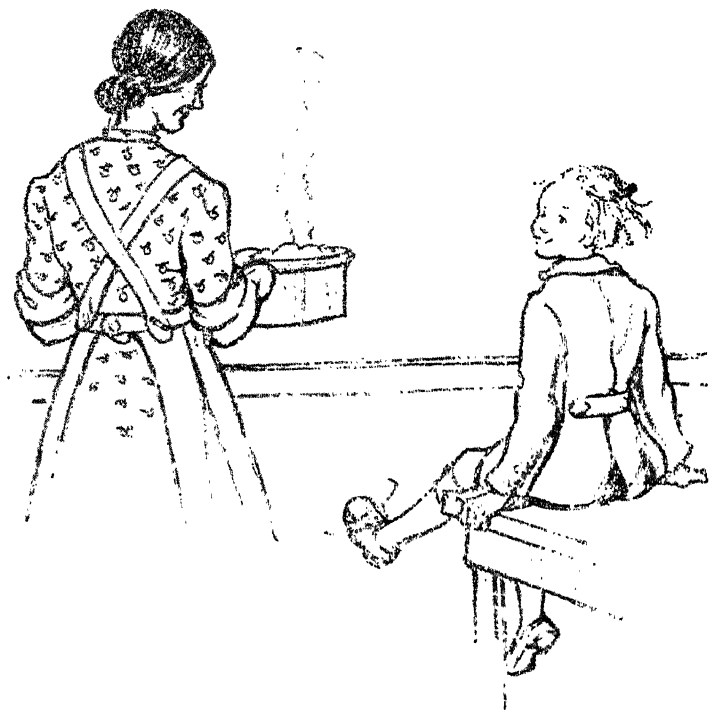
'I'm going with Rosalba.'

'When?'

'Soon as the holidays begin.'

Judy, last words finished with the friend who always





escorted her to her gate, came into the kitchen just in time to hear this.

‘Who’s going where when the holidays begin?’

‘Karen’s going to London with Rosalba.’

‘*London!*’ Judy could not help being impressed. A pang of pure jealousy shot through her. ‘But we’ve never any of us been to London. Mum hasn’t been, even. Who’s paying?’

‘Rosalba, you bet.’ Ralph was quite clear about that, anyway.

‘But what for?’

‘Rosalba is going to have an—an—audition.’ It was a word Karen had only heard half an hour ago and she was not very certain about it.



‘What on earth’s that?’

‘You play to an agent.’

‘But, you little cuckoo, an agent is a chap who sells you things.’

Ralph was inclined to think Karen was getting this all wrong.

‘Well, so he does sort of sell things—concerts and things.

You play at a concert

and get paid and he takes the money—but not all of it, Rosalba says.’

The door opened and with a rush of fresh cold air Mrs Forrest burst in.

‘Darlings, I’m late. Biddy, you’re late with their dinner. Do begin for goodness’ sake or you’ll all be late for school. Have you all washed your hands? Oh, Meg, you horrible child, you’ve lost your hair-ribbons again. That is too bad of you—the second time this week.’

‘I know—if only I could have black tape from Woolworths.’

What between Meg’s hair-ribbons and Biddy’s cabbage, which still wasn’t properly cooked, and the general scurry to get ready, eat their dinner, and be off again, Karen’s affairs were forgotten. That evening, however, her mother heard of the proposed trip in a polite letter from Rosalba saying how much she would like to take Karen and how she hoped they might go to a concert together.

'It's very kind of her, I'm sure,' said Mrs Forrest, somewhat perplexed. 'I can't imagine why she should want to take you to this—audition, whatever that may be. I'm very out of these things and I don't know what she has to do, but I should have thought you would have been terribly in the way.'

Karen, immensely proud of this word of which none of her family knew the meaning, translated it.

Mrs Forrest nodded her head wisely.

'I see. And if the agent doesn't think much of her she won't get a job. That's the way of it, I suppose. Oh, well, it won't make all that difference to her, luckily. But how does she come to want you, that's what I can't make out.'

That was not so easy to explain.

She had slipped in by the side door as usual that morning to be met by a call in Rosalba's voice. Would she come into the studio. She found the fire lit, its special logs, reserved for Rosalba, blazing away; they were cut from ships' timbers and the flames that darted about them burnt blue as the sea they had once ridden. Rosalba was sitting at the Steinway in the bay-window. The lid of the piano was open.

'Come and be an audience. Listen properly, I mean,' she said.

Karen said she'd love to and settled down on the edge of the big chair by the fireplace. She listened with all her heart while Rosalba played a couple of Chopin studies, a prelude of Rachmaninoff, a little Debussy piece about a girl with fair hair that Karen liked because it reminded her of Meg's plaits, and the Schumann *Carnaval*, a collection of little vivid pieces, all quite different from each other, with curious titles. Aunt Anne, who played

them, said they were a book of coloured portraits of Schumann's friends, and the last piece, a most ferocious *March of the Davidsbund*, was the terrible row they all had with the people who didn't approve of them. Schumann when he was at school used to play musical sketches to the other boys, caricaturing the masters, and this was his grown-up version of the same thing. Played by Aunt Anne the march certainly was a battle. Wrong notes showered, but the Davidsbund—all Schumann's friends—fought like lions. Now, however, Karen was astonished to find what a quiet affair it might be. It was altogether different. It was a never-ending surprise to find how different music could sound played by Aunt Anne and played by Rosalba. The notes were the same, but nothing else.

'That's enough,' said Rosalba, and got up, pink in the cheeks, excited. 'I do believe I'm nervous even playing to you. You're a very nice audience, though.'

Karen at once wished she had clapped. She hadn't thought of it.

'Did you like it?'

'Oh, *yes*.'

'I didn't forget anything, did I?'

'No, not a note.'

'Did you really like it?'

'Oh, *yes*.'

There was a pause. Then Rosalba said, 'I think perhaps I ought to try my luck, don't you?'

'Oh, yes,' said Karen, with no idea what she meant.

'Go up and play to Jacks & Inman, I mean. If I don't now I never shall.'

She sat down on the other big chair, clasping her hands together, twining her long fingers in and out of each

other, pressing them together till the knuckles showed white.

'I can, and I will, I can, and I will, I can, and I will. Do you ever say that kind of thing, Karen?'

Karen laughed. It sounded like a game.

'No, I mean it. When you begin a piece do you *know* you're going to get to the end?'

'Oh, yes, I do.'

That was the one thing Karen was sure about. She might make all the mistakes in the world but she could always get to the end.

Rosalba sighed and watched the fire.

Then she seemed struck by an idea.

'I tell you what, Karen, I'll take you with me. I believe you'll bring me luck. Will you come to London? We'll stay a night and go to a concert. It's time you heard a real orchestra. How would you like that?'

How would she indeed! No wonder Karen went dancing home, bursting with news for the family.

They all gave a hand when the day came for the expedition to start.

Judy lent her suit-case. 'I do think it's pretty sickening that the first one of us to go to London should be Karen; but there it is, she'd better have a decent suit-case.'

Ralph, to her infinite surprise, gave her one and sixpence. Since he had been at school a godfather whom he had never seen had taken to sending him pocket money, five shillings a month.

'You be dead certain where you're staying,' he said, weightily.

'I am certain. Smith's Hotel, Down Street.'

'Well, then, if you get lost all you have to do is to hop into a taxi and say that and give him the bob, and the sixpence if he makes you.'

'And if I don't get lost can I keep it?'

'Well . . . want it for anything special?'

'I'm saving up for a piano of my own.'

'Righto, keep the bob, anyway. I must buzz off,' and he became preoccupied about collecting the right books and papers. It was holiday time, but someone was giving him an hour's coaching in mathematics every morning. He stopped at the door, however, to say: 'How much have you got? Piano money, I mean?'

'One pound two.' All Karen's birthday and Christmas presents since she had stayed with Aunt Anne.

'Golly. I'll have to give you a hand when I get a job. Tooraloo.' He was gone.

## CHAPTER XI

### A CONCERT

KAREN had her hair washed, her coat turned and let down, and a new pair of gloves—all for London. She felt slightly unnatural when she found herself in the train sitting opposite Rosalba.

‘What do you feel like, Karen?’ said Rosalba. ‘I feel as if I was going to the dentist.’

Karen, who had only been to the dentist once and then rather enjoyed it, said: ‘Lovely. So do I.’

They were to go to the agent the next day. That night they had tickets for the Queen’s Hall, where the Metropolitan Symphony Orchestra was going to play under a distinguished conductor. In Judy’s suit-case was the nearest thing to an evening dress that Karen possessed and Meg’s string of corals. ‘As a matter of fact, you might as well hang on to them for ever,’ Meg had said, dangling them on a finger. ‘I don’t believe I shall ever go in for that kind of thing,’ and dropped them into the case. Whether Karen kept them for ever or not, she was going to wear them that night and sit in the front row rather to the left where she could watch the pianist’s hands. There was a piano concerto, and Rosalba, who knew all about such things, had taken her tickets in good time.

It was all so glorious Karen could hardly bear to sit still. The train thudded through the April countryside, singing the steady satisfactory song that belongs to

machinery working harmoniously, full tilt. Karen hummed away happily under cover of the noise.

Then came houses.

'Is this London?'

'Beginning,' said Rosalba, buried in her book.

It was a quiet beginning, just a scatter of cottages, a street, a factory like a burn on the green fields. Then more houses, fewer fields, longer streets; a church, a shop or two. Karen began to hum louder and faster. This was London, a place where they had none of them been, as Judy had remarked; where Biddy said she'd be in dread to walk the streets. They must be nearly there. She wondered why the train did not begin to slow up, why Rosalba did not shut up her book and put on her gloves. It was all roofs now, and grey streets as straight as pencils, slanting away from the train; then windows, back gardens, washing — endless washing hanging out to dry. Did every one in London do their own washing? Nothing green now except the new little leaves of the lilac bushes where the washing allowed them to be seen.

'But aren't we there?' she ventured.

Supposing they were in the wrong train; supposing instead of stopping at London they darted right through it and out the other side.

'No, not yet.'

'But isn't this London?'

'Oh, yes, it's London all right.'

Karen thought of Ralph's one and six with gratitude. It was certainly a place you could be lost in. Smith's Hotel, she said to herself, to be quite sure she hadn't forgotten it. It was lucky they had a person like Ralph in the family, someone who thought of everything.



'Here 's Paddington.'

Rosalba suddenly became alert. She put away her book, powdered her nose, let down the window.

'Now let 's get a taxi.'

The taxi ran up a slope. A black cat with a soiled white shirt-front sat on the wall by the iron palings watching the procession of travellers go past. 'I wonder whose cat that is,' said Karen, and Rosalba laughed, and said it was a London cat. So even cats of London were different from other cats.

They reached the hotel and went through its glass doors into another world, a quiet place, very warm and scented, with people sitting about having tea. They had theirs under a green palm like a tent, with cakes wheeled up to them on a sort of moving table—dozens of cakes, each one more delicious than the other.

'What shall we do about this?' asked Rosalba. 'You 'd better not eat more than usual, had you? We 've got the concert, remember. How many would you have at home?'

Karen had no idea because they never had anything at all like them at home. In the end she had a sort of chocolate bomb that burst when she bit it and covered her to the eyebrows with cream. She had wondered what the knives and forks and spoons were for; after that she knew. It was a wonderful tea. Dinner, too, in her evening frock and Meg's corals, was wonderfully unlike any dinner she had ever had. Everything, however, paled into insignificance when at last they reached the concert hall.

They were in good time; the orchestra were just beginning to come in. Their seats were in the second row; not the first, which, Rosalba said, gave you a crick in

your neck. Karen had heard an orchestra once or twice on Rosalba's wireless but she had never seen one. She was well acquainted, of course, with Barney's violin, and the fiddling that first taught her *Drink*, but these men who came in to sit down and at once be wholly absorbed in their instruments were very unlike Barney. He would clash his strings together once or twice: 'Och, I'm high but me peg's stuck,' he'd say, and there he was, off on his tune, one foot stamping in time to it.

The trouble these people were taking.

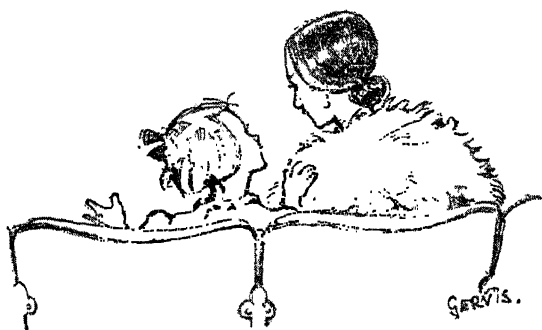
'Look at that man there, he keeps on sharpening his fiddle—he can't get it right——'

'Tuning, darling, tuning his violin.'

'And look at the one behind him. He's practising like anything—he really is. And he's got grey hair.'

The grey-haired man was trying over a passage high up on his E string, trying it over and over again, marking the fingering and then playing it again, completely absorbed.

'The greyer the hair the more you practise,' said Rosalba, and added with a rueful laugh, 'and the less you can play. I shall be growing grey after to-morrow. You see.'



The wood-wind filtered in and the air became full of twitterings, delicious runs, long high notes, sweet, dim, shrill, and cold as a mountain top.

'Who's doing all the lovely whistling?'

Karen wriggled about trying to see.

'The flutes and oboes and clarinets—all those people.'

'Oh, where, where?'

'You can't see them because they're behind their music desks.'

'Oh, I wish I could, I want to,' groaned Karen.

'Darling, you can't watch them all, you'd go quite mad.'

'There, I see one. He's got his whistle out sideways as if he was biting it.'

'That's a flute. You mustn't call it a whistle. And that's how you play it.'

Karen turned her attention to the brass, much easier to see, perched above the others as they were, some of them with instruments no music stands could hide.

'Look at the man with the sort of bell. There's something the matter with it. He keeps on putting his hand inside.'

'No, it's all right. It's a horn. That's the way to play it.'

'A horn? It doesn't look a bit like a horn. Is there a trumpet like they had in the Bible? Silver ones? Oh, there's a man climbing up to those huge great drums. You wouldn't have thought any one would be allowed to beat drums—such a noise, I mean—'

There was a burst of clapping and the 'first' violin came in.

'Oh,' breathed Karen thankfully, 'I saw there was an empty chair. I was so afraid he wasn't coming.'

'He always comes in alone like that after every one else. He's the leader of the orchestra.'

The leader of all these people! It astounded Karen that he could walk in like that, casual as any one, acknowledging the slight applause with the slightest of bows. He was, as leaders so often are, a person of great charm. Karen watched him tune his fiddle with adoring eyes.

'Now don't go falling in love with the first violin,' said Rosalba. 'Every one always does. He's used to it, but——'

Loud applause. The orchestra sprang to their feet. The distinguished conductor walked in with a quick, alert step in spite of the grey hair on his leonine head. The audience clapped, far more than for the first violin, and he bowed from the conductor's platform to right and left several times. The orchestra stood reverently at attention.

Karen found that astonishing.

'But he's not going to play—he's only going to count for them, isn't he?' she said, in a loud whisper.

'S—sh,' hissed Rosalba. The applause petered out and dead silence fell. The orchestra sat down again and the conductor spread his arms as if to fly over their heads. The concert began.

When she heard about this impending concert Aunt Anne had sent for the programme and had played as much of it as she could to Karen on their Saturday afternoons. That was the way to enjoy music, she said; you had to practise listening as much as you practised anything else. It began with the *Tannhauser* overture, and, thanks to her, the melody of the *Pilgrims' Song* that opened it was as familiar to Karen, as far as the actual notes were concerned, as *Drink*; but oh! the difference,

the unbelievable world of difference, between it on Aunt Anne's piano and this. At first, her eyes on the first violin, she had thought, agonized, why doesn't he begin? Why doesn't he put his bow on the strings? Why isn't he *ready*? Then, mysterious, dusky, still, and soft came the tune as if it was coming out of a dark night. Some of those people behind their desks were playing it. So they didn't all play together all the time; the violins weren't doing anything at all. That was the first surprise. Soon they did, though. The Venusberg music that followed was strange to Karen because Aunt Anne had not been able even to sketch it in—too much going on, she said, and now Karen saw what she meant. The trills and darting runs played round her head like forked lightning. The first violin was working now; his bow flashed up and down with the bows of all his followers after him. Oh, why hadn't she learnt the violin instead of the piano? Think of sitting there following that wonderful lead, helping to make this marvellous noise. She tried to listen. Aunt Anne had said the *Pilgrims' Song* fought with the other throughout the piece and in the end vanquished it. Sure enough, back it came at last, this time a noble great river of sound with the violins screaming overhead like seagulls in a storm. The great melody thundered on its conquering way, reached its climax, its last inevitable chord, and stopped.

Gloriously deafened, Karen could only gasp.

'Didn't you like it, darling?' asked Rosalba, clapping gently, and Karen turned unseeing eyes on her. She felt as if she had dived to the bottom of the sea and come up again. Quite dazed with sound she managed to murmur that it was lovely, and collected herself to clap.

In a dream she heard Rosalba say he had taken it too slowly. He? Karen had entirely forgotten the conductor; her eyes had been glued to the first violin fighting his losing battle with the trombones. The next piece, however, was by a modern composer. Aunt Anne had not known it; she dubbed it 'jazz' and told Karen to shut her eyes and wait for the concerto. Karen, however, thought it a thrilling affair. It started with a clash of cymbals that made her jump out of her skin; every one in the orchestra seemed to be hard at it together the whole time and she watched them, fascinated. She revised her opinion of the conductor. He certainly was doing more than count. With his whole body he seemed to be drawing the music out of his players. A wave of the arm and the harp threw a shimmering cascade into the music; a shake of the fist and the drums deafened you; sometimes he turned to the violins and, stooping to them, drew a thread of sound from them, soft as silk; then for minutes together he was attending to the others and the fiddle players might not have been there for all the notice he took of them. By some miracle they all seemed to understand him. She was not exactly listening now; the music beat against her like a wind, it was all she could do to watch. How they were all trying! That was what impressed her most. No loud pedal to cover up mistakes—you just didn't make them. When the piece was over Rosalba said it was 'amusing,' had Karen enjoyed it? Of course she had. It was like the circus she had once seen. She clapped her loudest and wished they would do it all over again.

Then they exchanged smiles, she and Rosalba. Someone had struck the note A on a piano—their own

instrument. At once the orchestra was industriously tuning to it. Someone came and opened the lid of the piano on the edge of the platform—a huge grand, bigger than the churchwarden's, bigger even than Rosalba's Steinway. The audience were rustling with expectation.

'It's Miriam Hals. We're lucky,' whispered Rosalba.

A woman in a blue dress came in, to be greeted with a burst of applause. She smiled and bowed as if the audience were old friends who she was pleased to see again, and sat down. The clapping died and a most complete silence fell. The conductor raised his baton, she looked up at him, and without more ado they began. Karen stole a look at Rosalba. Where were the arpeggios, where was the handkerchief? It might have been Aunt Anne sitting down to play, so natural, so unaffected, so pleasantly ordinary was the lady in blue.

It was the Schumann concerto, a great favourite at Sharpset. Karen knew it fairly well. She was prepared for the quiet opening; she could play it herself. What she was not prepared for was the lovely singing of the piano. No one she had ever heard had made a piano sound like that. How was it done? Was it the person or was it the piano? Derry might know; instinctively she felt that he was the only person who would. There would be no good asking Rosalba. She stole a look at her and surprised a curious, unhappy expression on her face. She was looking unusual, somehow. Her dark hair was parted in the middle, a new way of doing it, and rolled back tightly from her forehead; she wore long glittering earrings, also new to Karen; her white fur coat had a huge collar that framed

her head. She looks like a princess, thought Karen; if she was up there at the piano it would be like the queen playing to us—and then she said to herself that one doesn't want queens to play concertos. Miriam Hals was not wearing glittering earrings, her dark hair was done very simply, her blue dress was a lovely colour but very plain—then a familiar passage caught her attention and brought her back to the music. In the second movement there was a particularly lovely bit; Aunt Anne had played it to her over and over again. 'You mustn't miss this,' she had said. 'The piano doesn't matter for the moment, you listen to the cellos. They begin—it grows—crescendo—the violins take it up—away it goes over the mountains and out of sight—away: out of sight—and—sound.' Aunt Anne's cracked voice did its best to sing the phrase and get the diminuendo. 'What is it your Irish fiddler used to say?'

'Put that at the back of yer soul, me boyo.'

'Quite right. That's the place to put that bit and don't you come back to me saying you've missed it.'

Remembering that, Karen listened. She watched Miriam Hals. She seemed in a world of her own. Sometimes the turn of a phrase swept her into movement—a swaying, a turn of the head that seemed just another expression of the music she was playing. 'She's forgotten we're here,' thought Karen. 'She's forgotten everything on earth except her music.' The passage came and went; there was no mistaking it, though Aunt Anne's version was very different. The cellos began, grave and questioning; the violins made their lovely reply. She would be able to say she had not missed it. Then, at last, Miriam Hals leapt like a swimmer into the last bubbling movement. It was exciting, thrilling, and



then—misery, it was done. She stood up, smiled and bowed to the audience. ‘Lovely, isn’t it, I hope you enjoyed it as much as I did,’ she seemed to say. They roared and stamped; she bowed again and was gone.

Karen clapped like one possessed.

‘It’s not a difficult concerto,’ said Rosalba in her ear, applauding languidly. ‘I play it.’

Karen looked at her with admiration. Was she really sitting next to someone who played like that.

‘Do you? Like that? I thought yours was the Grieg?’

‘One doesn’t play only one concerto. I have had a rehearsal of that—in Germany.’

‘With the orchestra playing too?’

‘Of course. Don’t wear yourself out. It’s no good. She can’t give an encore. The second half is being broadcast and they have to be punctual.’

It was the interval. The orchestra left their instruments on their chairs and became ordinary men instead of magicians, strolling away out of sight under the platform somewhere.

‘Oh, shan’t we see her again. *We must*,’ cried Karen in a despairing voice, continuing her feeble little clap.

Rosalba became suddenly irritated.

‘I’m afraid I’ve had enough, Karen. I’ve got to play myself to-morrow. I don’t want to get too tired.’

She stood up, wrapping her white fur coat round her.

‘You don’t mind, do you, darling?’

• Karen said of course she did not mind. It had been lovely. As she struggled back into her school coat she wondered what Aunt Anne would say when she found she had missed her chance of hearing the Fifth Symphony in the second half of the concert. She had walked about

the room clapping her hands, trying to get the ominous rhythm of the opening bars that Aunt Anne said was Fate Knocking on the Door. Well, Fate would knock that night in vain as far as she was concerned; she sighed as she followed Rosalba's tall swaying figure to the door. 'Shakespeare and Beethoven, you can't begin them too early or go on with them too late': that's what Aunt Anne had said. Her own feeling was that if she was not to see Miriam Hals again or hear another note of that heavenly piano she might as well go home to bed. She felt suddenly, enormously tired, half asleep. Her first concert was over.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE AUDITION

THEY started off in good time next morning. Rosalba's appointment was for half-past ten.

'You'll have to carry my music, Karen. You know what my wrists are.'

Karen seized the music case. Darling Rosalba, she wasn't looking a bit well.

'Just feel my hands.'

They were stone cold.

'Where are your big gloves? Haven't you brought them?' Karen felt like a mother. 'You put your hands into hot water, boiling hot water, and then put on the gloves, quick as you can—and then let's *run*.'

She routed out the huge fur gauntlets from the bottom of Rosalba's suit-case, the same gloves she had worn herself at the Women's Institute, and Rosalba took her advice as far as wearing them went. They set off, not running, as Karen had suggested, but at a good pace, Rosalba covering the ground with her long, easy stride and Karen prancing beside her. A tearing April wind blew them across Oxford Street, past Selfridges, and into Wigmore Street where the audition was held. How glorious London was! If only I had Biddy here, thought Karen; Biddy and Meg, to show them the glittering shops, the towering houses, the thrilling roaring traffic. If only they could hear the gorgeous noise that never stopped for a moment. If only they could have seen the

lights last night. Why, coming back from the concert was like driving through Aladdin's cave.

'Now, Karen, tell me, what shall I begin with?'

Karen returned from the glories of London to Rosalba and her audition.

'The Chopin Polonaise.'

'No. I don't feel like that.'

'Oh, but I do. I do,' cried Karen, sniffing the gay wind. 'I feel exactly like it.'

'Do walk properly, don't skip like that.' There was an edge to Rosalba's voice. Darling Rosalba, she hadn't slept well last night, even after four aspirins. Karen slipped her arm through hers and walked soberly in step.

'Then the Debussy Arabesque. You play it so beautifully.'

'Do I?'

'Yes, of course you do.'

Rosalba groaned.

'I do forget it so.'

'Have the music then.'

'No, I can't. No one does.'

They arrived at the hall. It had a chilly early-morning appearance. An elderly woman, a black bonnet shrouding her long thin face, was on her hands and knees washing the flagged entrance.

Rosalba looked at her watch and frowned.

'We're twenty minutes too early. You shouldn't have made me hurry like that, Karen. Just run in and ask if this is all right, whether Jacks & Inman are having an audition there. I'll wait for you.'

There was no one else in the entrance hall so Karen asked the charwoman. She dried her hands in her apron

and said, 'Yes, it was there all right'—going on through the swing doors. Karen listened and heard, faintly, a high, shrill note.

'Steam whistle, if you ask me,' said the charwoman



listening disdainfully. 'She won't do no good. You playin' to 'im?'

She asked the question quite naturally, not as if she was trying to be funny.

'Me? No, not me. But we're rather early.'

Karen looked back at Rosalba standing on the steps looking down the street. The charwoman looked too.

'Yer auntie, is it? Don't signify, bein' early I mean. They steps inside and listens.'

But Rosalba would not step inside and listen. She would not go in a moment before she had to, she said, so they went for an uncomfortable walk round Manchester Square to kill the time. She even mounted the steps of the Wallace Collection, saying a look at it would steady her nerves, when, suddenly, the time had gone—they were late.

'It's after half-past now. Oh, *Karen!*'

They took to their heels and sped round the square and back to Wigmore Street.

The charwoman was still doing the flags in the hall.

'Oh, 'ere y' are. Gentleman's bin out lookin' for yer.'

They shot through the swing doors and into a tall young man with a sheaf of papers in his hand.

'Oh, good,' he said amiably. 'Miss Mersey-White, isn't it?'

He looked from Rosalba to Karen as if not sure which was the performer. Like the charwoman he seemed to find it a natural question to ask. Karen felt a glow of importance. People like her—looking, at all events, like her—did play at auditions then.

'I am Miss Mersey-White.'

'Oh, good,' said the young man again, this time in a whisper, for a violin was tuning up. 'Just sit down a moment, will you. He won't be very long.'

They sank into seats near the door.

'What are you going to play?' boomed a voice behind them.

Rosalba turned and looked with horrified fascinated gaze. 'That's him,' she whispered.

The fiddle player was a youth of eighteen or so. He called out from the platform that he had brought a Max Bruch concerto and something of Sarasate's.

'Right,' said the voice. 'Start with the concerto, will you.'

He's not in a fuss, thought Karen, watching the youth tune his fiddle. Very softly he tried his strings till he got them exactly right—a better way than Barney's, she decided—nodded to his accompanist, and began.

He played beautifully. 'Isn't he wonderful!' breathed Karen, and made ready to clap. There were so few people there, not more than five or six, that she would have to make all the noise she could. People liked being clapped.

Very soon, however, the voice boomed again.

'Thanks very much. Have you got a bit of Bach, by any chance? Right. Let's have it.'

This time the violin, unaccompanied, seemed to fill the hall. To Karen the boy appeared to be playing all the strings at the same time—or was there another violin she couldn't see?

'Is it a sort of duet or what?' whispered Karen; and Rosalba murmured something about double-stopping being very effective.

'Double——?' But there was no time to explain.

'Thanks very much. Now the Sarasate, please,' said the voice, who seemed always very polite, and a wonderful blaze of fireworks was let loose. Now surely we ought to clap, thought Karen, when the piece was done, but the voice only said once more: 'Thanks very much. We've got your address, haven't we? You might leave your telephone number too, will you. As a matter of fact, I'll very likely give you a ring after lunch.'

'Oh, thanks awfully,' said the youth, as if a telephone call was something to be very grateful for. 'Anyhow, mother 'll be there to answer it.' He wrapped up his violin tenderly in a white silk handkerchief, said 'Thanks awfully' to the accompanist, and fled.

'Miss Mersey-White?' boomed the voice.

Rosalba, full of surprises to-day, got up and did a most startling thing.

'You go, Karen,' she said. 'I'd rather. Go and wait outside till I come,' and before Karen knew where she was she found herself pushed outside the doors.

The charwoman seemed surprised to see her.

'You ain't bin long then,' she said.

'She's just beginning. She wouldn't let me stay and listen to her.'

'Why ever not?'

'I don't know. I thought she wanted me. That's why I've come.'

'Got the jitters, has she?'

Karen looked blank.

'Nervous-like? Jim-jams?'

Karen thought perhaps that was it—or perhaps it was the headache. She had taken aspirin all night without being any better.

'Jitters—that's what it'll be. It's the idea. I've known 'em sick till the moment they went on.'

'Oh, how awful.'

'Wot I say is no one won't lock yer up even if yer do get a bit wrong in yer playin'. Wot's it matter, all said an' done?' and the charwoman went on to tell Karen about her grandson. He, Ernie was his name, had been in for a festival and won fifteen shillings and never turned a hair. Didn't know what nerves was, Ernie



didn't. Karen listened with her mind behind the swing doors listening to Rosalba. How was she getting on? What was it that horrible girl in Judy's form had said? That she would never be any good. That she always forgot. All wrong, of course. She played wonderfully—every one said so. Perhaps even at that moment the voice was clapping his hands and saying: 'Thanks very much. Who is it by?'

'... only eleven and 'e played on 'is flute something lovely. Like a bird, I always say. The 'ole festival thought the same. Yer should 've 'eard 'em clap. My.'

For want of something to say Karen asked what a festival was.

The old lady seemed shocked.

'Ain't yer ever 'eard of a festival? Why, they 'as them all over the place. Ernie, 'e won fifteen shillings and ever such a pretty card. At the 'Ighgate Festival that was. See that poster there,' she pointed to one on the wall, 'that 's the London Festival. A big one, that is ...'

They were studying the poster when Rosalba came through the swing doors. The tall young man was opening them politely for her. 'Oh, good,' he was saying.

Rosalba, very flushed, was talking rather fast.

'... and you would like my telephone number, too, wouldn't you? Here it is on my card.'

'Oh, good,' said the young man, and took it.

'And you'll explain to Mr—whoever it was—that I don't really break down like that. Really, I never do. You'll make him understand, won't you.'

'Oh, rather. That'll be quite all right. We'll let

you know if anything turns up for you. You'd rather like Bournemouth or Eastbourne? Oh, good.'

With a last 'Oh, good,' he ushered them into the street. Karen took the music case and slipped her arm through Rosalba's. I'll let her begin, she said to herself.

They turned towards Oxford Street again; this time the wind was in their faces, blowing all speech out of them.

'Well, darling,' said Rosalba, at last, under cover of Selfridge's doorway. Karen was relieved to hear her voice, languid, calm as usual. 'What did you do while I was enduring my nightmare?'

'Was it a nightmare?' Karen ventured.

'Was it not! I never want to hear that Grieg concerto again. But it's done. Don't let's talk of it. What were you looking at so earnestly when I came out?'

Karen told her about the old lady's grandson aged eleven, who played the flute and won fifteen shillings.

'Karen!'

Rosalba stopped dead and clapped her hands together—a most unusual thing for her to do.

'That's the very thing. You shall go in for a festival. Lots of festivals. I believe I was born to be a teacher, not a concert player at all.'

'But I should never be able to play the flute——' began Karen stupidly.

'Don't be silly, darling. You'll play the piano, of course. I'll work you up. They have festivals in the spring and autumn, I believe. I'll find out'—and like the agent's young man she finished up with 'Oh, good.'

## CHAPTER XIII

### RALPH FILLS IN A FORM

THE summer term flew on wings. Ralph made thirty-seven runs in a form cricket match and played for his house three times. He was put in last twice but he made first seven and then five and was not out each time, so the third time he went in quite high up and made twenty-two. Meg, who was becoming an authority and who hung over the fence of the cricket ground watching his every stroke, said his style was good. He was developing a late cut, she said. What Ralph wanted to do, however, was to keep wicket. He spent a good deal of his time behind the nets, crouched behind the batsman, watching every ball. That, as he explained to them after lunch one day, was the way to learn, and next season he would have his own gloves and do some practice inside the nets or he'd eat his hat.

Meg, who was captain of her form eleven, though she still had to play the gentle game of the junior school, agreed that wicket-keeper was the perfect place. A captain, she maintained, jolly well had to keep wicket or how could she possibly know how badly people were bowling.

'Girls' cricket——' began Ralph.

'Yes, I know, but it isn't as rotten as it was. Look at the way that team of women came from South Africa or somewhere and played at Lord's. Next year I'll be playing properly with a hard ball and all that, and then you'll see.'

Meg was twelve now and not so slow of speech as she had been. She would get her remove into the senior school next term. It would be autumn then and Miss Johns had told her she was fairly safe to get into the third hockey eleven. Meanwhile she was to get on with her drill and gym and lead the junior school in the demonstration at the end of term. Meg was making her mark. She was strong and supple in her green shorts and white shirt and, Miss Johns said, reliable: 'Which, my dear, is *everything*.'

Judy was frankly envious.

'It's sickening the way I can't do anything. I don't seem to be a bit better at tennis than I was last year and I don't believe I'll ever climb a rope if I live to be fifty. But I've got a bicycle—that's one thing.'

Like Ralph she had produced a godmother, a godmother who wrote from no less a place than India to ask her if there was anything she particularly wanted, now that she had gone to school. A bicycle, Judy had replied by return of post, and a bicycle it was. She now started for school ten minutes later than Meg and Karen, and sailed proudly past them just as they were turning in at the gate.



'Anyway, Karen's pretty putrid at everything,' said Ralph cheerfully, and with that they all agreed.

'All this music is——' then he looked at his watch. 'Golly.' He flung together his books and was gone like a streak of lightning. Whatever might happen to the wicket-keeping or anything else he meant to pass the junior certificate that happened in July.

'All I can say is I hope I never have to go in for an exam.,' said Meg, in heartfelt tones, when, with a bang of the door, he was gone.

'You will, though,' said Judy, collecting her books too, but in a leisurely way, for she had half an hour longer for lunch than Ralph. 'You'll start Latin and Algebra next term.'

Meg said gloomily that it was like the crossing from Belfast to think of it.

'I shan't ever have to do anything like that, shall I?' asked Karen fearfully.

'Bound to,' said Judy. 'If you don't go in for the ordinary exams. there are tons of music ones. There's a girl in my form'—with Judy there was always 'a girl in my form.' She was always surrounded by dozens of friends. She was always being asked out to tea. On three Sundays running she had gone out to lunch—'Cicily, her name is. She's got a cousin who has passed eight music exams. Eight. She's got the certificates framed all round her bed.'

'How awful,' said Meg.

'Yes, ghastly, I should think. She sticks pictures of Clark Gable over them, Cicily says. But what I mean is she's passed eight and here's Karen not off on one yet.'

'Is she frightfully good, d' you suppose?' asked Meg.

‘Must be. As a matter of fact she’s grown-up now and never touches it.’

Karen wriggled in her chair. They didn’t know what they were talking about, neither Judy, nor the girl in her form, nor even Meg. Grown-up now and never touches it.

‘As a matter of fact I’m going in for the festival,’ she said in a small voice. She felt it was time she mentioned it.

‘Festival? What’s that?’

‘The same sort of thing as an exam., I think, only you get money.’

‘Money?’ Meg’s calm blue eyes looked surprised.

Judy pricked up her ears.

‘Money? But who goes giving you money?’ she inquired.

‘You win it. I knew a boy—or at least I knew his grandmother, in London it was—who won fifteen shillings.’

‘How?’

‘Playing the flute.’

‘Oh, *well*——’

Judy seemed to think that any one who played so difficult a thing as a flute would be worth that.

‘When does it happen, your festival?’ asked Meg.

That, Karen did not know. Rosalba had gone away for two months. In August the Forrest family were going back to their borrowed rectory at Brent Hill. Rosalba was not to be there this time; Karen, in fact, did not expect to see her again until September, when school started. She had promised to write and she had promised to send the names of the pieces Karen had to learn, but so far she had done neither. Meanwhile

Karen continued to slip through the side door and up to the little Broadwood in the small sitting-room. As long as she disturbed no one she might practise on it as much as she liked.

Judy sniffed.

'Well, all I can say is if it's like an exam. you ought to be working for it.'

'I am—in a way,' Karen did her best to retort; but she had misgivings. She had an uncomfortable feeling that Judy was right; she ought to be working for the festival if she was really going in for it. She had her Saturday afternoons at Sharpset, but unfortunately the garden in June was almost as attractive and absorbing as the piano. Aunt Anne, planting out her asters, sowing her wallflowers for next year, watering her tomatoes in the small greenhouse, was preoccupied. She listened, of course, to a certain extent. If music of any kind was going on she heard it. She would stand in the french-window, watering-can in hand, a trail of bass hanging out from one pocket of her overall, the same flat hat balanced on her head, and say in a dissatisfied voice: 'Oughtn't you to be playing scales?'

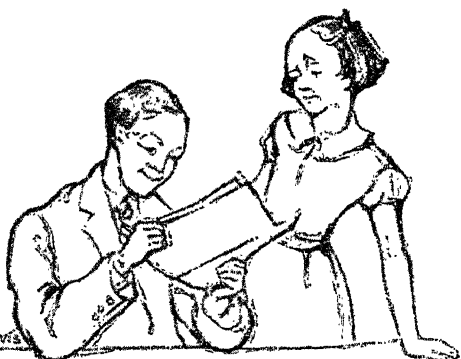
'No. Rosalba says you get all you want from playing the scale passages in pieces.'

'But in that case oughtn't you to be playing them—the scale passages, I mean? Seems to me you do nothing but enjoy yourself, playing everything through like that.'

'Rosalba says——'

'No good going on about what Miss Mersey-White once said. It's weeks and weeks since she said anything to you. Your left hand doesn't know what it's doing. If I was teaching you I'd tie up that loud pedal with a piece of string so that you couldn't use it.'

And, unable to use her string on Karen's pedal, she would stump off to tie it round her delphiniums. The flowers at all events should be properly trained.



Karen in the depths of her heart agreed. Miriam Hals, she felt sure, practised passages and got the fingering right, like the grey-haired fiddler behind the first desk in the orchestra. One day she would herself. At present the moment she sat down to the piano a shadowy audience ranged itself round her, and she felt she must play her piece through at all costs. Showing off, Judy would say, even if there was no one there.

It was a relief when, one day in July, a letter came from Rosalba enclosing the syllabus of the festival. It was like a programme, a small book in a paper cover. Karen opened it and stared at page after page of different classes for people of different ages, all playing different music. What a terrific affair a festival seemed to be.

'What's that you've got?' asked Ralph.

'It's my sy—syl—' How did one pronounce syllabus? 'It's my festival.'

'Here, let's see.'

She handed over her precious booklet.

'Lumme, what a thing! Look at all the presidents and patrons and what not. All very posh.' Ralph became very derisive. "Candidates who have not



previously gained a scholarship, exhibition, or cash prize exceeding ten guineas may compete." That hoofs out Karen, anyway.'

If only he wouldn't be funny. He went on reading out bits of her programme. "'The adjudicator's"—gosh, what a word—adjudicator—"The adjudicator's decision"—bless his little heart—"is final"—and don't you forget it, my girl. "Performances may be stopped at any time when the judgment is formed"—and not another chirp from any one, please.'

'Don't tease the child,' said his mother.

'Is it the festival you told us about?' inquired Meg, in her sensible way. Karen nodded her head, past speech. 'Then Karen is going in for it and you can shut up, Ralph.'

'Get on. She's not.'

'She is. She said so ages ago.'

Ralph was frankly incredulous.

'Don't believe it.'

'I tell you I am. Rosalba has written a letter and filled in a form and sent me a postal order and I'm to get the music and put it down to her if it isn't in her cabinet.'

'Don't take the slightest notice of Ralph,' said Mrs Forrest. 'He doesn't know the first thing about it. Of course he doesn't. How kind of Rosalba to give you the music. There's a special class for little girls, you may be sure.'

'All right. Let's look.'

Ralph hunted expertly through the book and found it.

'Right as rain. Here it is. How old are you, kid? Ten?'

'I'll be eleven by then.'

'Right. Eleven. "Minuet with Variations No 20.

Hundred Best Classics, Book I. Prize: 1st, Silver Medal, 2nd, Bronze Medal, 3rd, Value five shillings." That's you. "Entrance five shillings" H'm. Not much in it, is there.'

Karen turned to Rosalba's letter. 'I'm sending six shillings, your entrance fee,' she wrote; and there was the postal order with six shillings printed on it.

'Six shillings, not five. I've got it.'

'No, five,' said Ralph, who was accurate. 'Perhaps the extra bob's for luck.'

"I've marked the class," read Karen. 'That's what she says. She's marked it.'

'No marks that I can see. But that class is your cup of tea all right. "Eleven years of age and over" You'll be over.'

'Darling Karen, don't look so worried. Let me see Rosalba's letter.' Mrs Forrest took it and read: "'I've marked the class I want you to go in for. Get all the music and see which group you like best.'" That's what she says. Now let's find her mark.'

Ralph, now hot on the scent, looked over his mother's shoulder and found a cross on page seven.

'There it is. "Junior Repertoire Class. For Candidates under sixteen. Entrance fee six shillings. Prize one pound ten in cash."'

Mrs Forrest looked puzzled.

'But isn't that very ambitious? Do you think she really means it?'

'Thirty bob.' Ralph was impressed at last. 'She must think you pretty hot stuff, Karen. I suppose she knows.'

'I suppose she does,' said his mother. 'Certainly I don't.'

'Of course she does,' cried Karen, devouring the list of music with her eyes. There were two groups, 'A' and 'B,' three pieces in each. Group 'A' had one of the Mendelssohn *Songs without Words* in it—the name shone from the page like the face of an old friend—but the other two were by Pachulski and Rébikoff, two alarming names she had never heard of and couldn't pronounce, and that would anyway cause Aunt Anne to sniff and say 'jazz.' Group 'B' was better; it had a Chopin waltz and a Schumann piece she knew.

'What do you have to learn for it?' asked Meg, opening her placid eyes very wide. It was astonishing the way Karen seemed to be getting a thrill out of what was, after all, only a sort of exam. It might have been a tennis match, or gym., or something one could really enjoy, by the look on her face.

'I shall do Group "B,"' said Karen grandly.

'You won't, my girl,' said Ralph, who was still studying the syllabus. 'Listen to uncle. "Requirements: The following six pieces are to be prepared and one piece from each group will be chosen by lot, five minutes before the competition begins." You'll do Group "A" and Group "B"—that is, after you've learnt to read the plain English of the syllabus.'

'Give me that horrible little book,' said his mother holding out her hand for it. 'And don't for heaven's sake be so superior.'

Ralph grinned.

'One more word before we part. Listen. "The Adjudicator"—and, mind you, he gets a capital letter every blessed time he's mentioned—"the Adjudicator will select an additional piece from either group for recalled candidates."'

'What's a recalled candidate?' inquired Meg.

'Now you're asking.' Ralph threw the book down on the table. 'All I can say is Karen'll have to pull up her socks if she goes anywhere near it.'

Mrs Forrest and Karen put their heads together, poring over the Junior Repertoire Class.

'Darling, don't you think it seems rather a lot? I don't pretend to know anything about it, of course, but it looks to me as if Ralph was right—you have to learn six pieces, and Rosalba not even here to teach them to you. Can you do it, do you think?'

Rosalba's mark danced in front of Karen's eyes—a cross beside 'Candidates under sixteen years of age.' Rosalba thought she could do it, so of course she could.

'Oh, yes,' she said stoutly. 'I know the Mendelssohn and nearly the Schumann.'

'That leaves four only, not so bad,' said Mrs Forrest slightly relieved. The child must really have some gift if she was ready to compete with people five years older than herself. She began to feel proud of her.

Ralph began again: 'I think Rosalba's batty if you ask me——'

'No one is asking you,' put in his mother.

'Righty-o. What I was going to say was Rosalba's started filling up the entry form and if Karen is really going in we'd better get on with it. I'm rather a dab at block capitals.'

If there was a thing Ralph enjoyed it was filling up a form, any kind of form. He sat down and pulled the booklet towards him. The entry form was printed on the last page.

Mrs Forrest asked for the last time: 'You're sure,

quite sure you want to enter? Don't if you don't feel like it, darling.'

'Quite perfectly sure,' said Karen.

'My hat,' breathed Meg. That wasn't how they'd get her consent if ever she had to fill up a form for an exam.—which heaven forbid.

"Candidates Surname or Name of Choir or Band." What will yours be, Karen? Free Forresters. Forrest Tinklers. Forrest Murmurs. Official Accompanist two bob extra——'

There he was, being funny again. Karen grew as red as a turkey cock.

'You're a beast, Ralph. You're a pig, you're a——'

'Print her name properly or give it to me,' said Mrs Forrest in a cold voice. 'I should have thought you knew enough about entry forms to know they have to be filled up very carefully indeed.'

'Righty-o. Sorry, Karen.' Ralph saw it was time to stop. 'There, I've printed it a treat and mum's got a line to herself for "Signature of Parent or Guardian Guaranteeing Age."'

Mrs Forrest added her signature. At last it was done; filled in, torn out of the book and put into an envelope, the postal order folded inside.

'Here's a stamp, darling,' said Mrs Forrest. 'Take it out yourself and post it in the pillar box at the corner. Then you'll know it's gone.'

## CHAPTER XIV

### PREPARATIONS

SUMMER at Brent Hill was even more delicious than the year before. The twins' fourteenth birthday was celebrated by a tennis tournament on the two courts belonging to the Fergussons. Mr Fergusson gave a tennis racket as first prize and a dozen balls as second, and Mrs Fergusson provided a marvellous tea. Judy on her bicycle was here, there, and everywhere, out to lunch, and tea, and supper, and the rest of the day she seemed always to be talking to her friends over the telephone. There was no telephone at home so that was a new and special treat. Meg and Ralph played serious singles at tennis (Meg getting fifteen in the game and generally being beaten), except on Wednesdays and Saturdays when Ralph almost always had a cricket match. These Meg always attended, taking up her position behind the wicket when he was batting and keeping a lynx eye on every stroke he made. She kept his bowling analysis when he bowled and also a special record of her own invention when he was keeping wicket, putting down every bye, every wide, and every ball he took on the leg side. After the match they walked home and spent the rest of the evening discussing it.

Meg was critical, but fair.

'You could have stumped that old colonel, but it wasn't your fault. It was a rotten throw-in.'

'Yes, that chap can't shy for nuts—dribbling it along

the ground like a girl—oh, sorry. You haven't got a bad length, as a matter of fact.'

Meg let that pass.

'You stopped seven on the leg side and you let eleven byes go. Not too good.'

'I got the curate, though.'

'Yes, the yorker. I knew he'd run out once too often, that Mr Howard.'

'Can't he slog 'em all the same . . .' and the conversation went on and on.

Biddy was bored to death with them.

'Them two, heard ye ever the like of them?' she said to her mistress. 'Wouldn't ye think when they come into the house they'd have a crack with Karen? And they scuddin' up and down after a ball the whole day. Great ould comrades they are, them two.'

'Karen is quite happy and quite busy,' said Mrs Forrest.

'She's a great wee girl altogether,' said Biddy fondly.

'She's got her piano, and she's got Benjie.'

Benjie, the Fergussons' spaniel, had met them with a frenzy of welcome. At first he seemed to worship them all equally. Then, gradually, he discovered that his particular friend was Karen, the one he had found for himself that day in the laurels. He had grown rather broader in the beam since last year, owing to the tricks the cook taught him by means of lumps of sugar, and the last thing he wanted was to follow Judy's bicycle along a hot hard road. Meg and Ralph had plenty of balls, but what was the good of that. They never seemed to be on the ground where a dog could get at them.

'I say, Karen, do hang on to Benjie. That's a new tennis ball he's got.'

'Karen, take Benjie away, will you. He gets under my feet when I'm serving.'

That was the way they talked. Only Karen seemed to understand the proper use of a ball—to throw it as far as possible for a dog to fetch. She did that very well. Also she had an engaging way of playing the piano so that a dog could lie down with his head on the foot that worked the pedal and be gently rocked up and down to a pleasant buzzing sound, like millions of different small animals a long way off. Benjie, eyes shut, giving an accompanying moan now and again, enjoyed Karen's practising.

Karen enjoyed the practising too. It was a year since she had first played the piano in that friendly white-walled drawing-room with its faded rose chintz and enormous vases of flowers. It was satisfactory to feel that she had improved. The music in the cabinet beside the piano seemed much easier this year. She could play three of the festival pieces; the Mendelssohn, the Schumann, and the Chopin waltz. The two foreigners, as she called them, she decided to leave till Rosalba came back.





Besides these, however, there was something of Bach and that she kept putting off and putting off. Every time she looked at the nice clean copy she had bought and put down to Rosalba she seemed to hear Aunt Anne: 'Your left hand doesn't know what it's doing.' The Bach was the sort of piece where your left hand simply had to know, and at present it didn't seem to want to learn.

Altogether it was a very happy summer for everybody. Karen and Benjie spent most of it together and in the end it was capped in a most glorious way for the two of them.

One hot September day Mr Fergusson in his cool, string-coloured suit, his Panama hat well tilted over his thick spectacles, came upon them both in the little wood between the houses. Karen, in Meg's last year's green shorts and white shirt, was sitting under a tree thinking how lovely and hot it was and how dreadful that holidays and warm weather should ever have to end. Benjie was lying, spread out as much as possible so as to get all the coolness he could from the damp beech leaves under him. He had run after his ball so often and so fast in his thick fur coat that there was not another step left in him. All he could do when he heard his master's step was to open one eye and give two bangs with his feathery tail, to say: 'Gosh! It's hot.'

'Karen. Just the person I wanted to see.' Mr Fergusson sat down beside her. 'You know we're going for a cruise for most of the winter. Well, I'm wondering what to do with Benjie.'

Benjie, hearing his name, gave one more bang with his tail—he liked to feel people were talking about him—and fell asleep. Poor Benjie. Karen, running one of

his silky ears through her fingers, felt glad he could not understand. Why couldn't dogs go for cruises too?

'He's awfully fond of you. I was just wondering whether you could possibly take him.'

'What? Home?'

Karen could hardly believe her ears. One of the worst things about the holidays coming to an end was having to part with Benjie.

'I mean, do you think your mother would let you?'

Karen sprang to her feet. She was sure she would. Mummy loved Benjie as much as any of them. She was in, couldn't they go at once and ask her?

So Benjie joined the Forrest household and went back to school with them. When term began he had his part to play in the routine of the day as much as any of them. In the morning he rushed, barking excitedly, after which ever one of them was shouting loudest for a grammar book, a special pencil, the right ruler. Ralph, who, as time went on, was seldom the loser, cheering him on with sporting shouts of 'Fetch it out. Good boy, bring it along.' The moment the last of them had gone, however, he went to the kitchen and lay as if dead under the kitchen table till it was time to go shopping with Mrs Forrest. In the afternoon he generally did whatever Karen was doing. Occasionally and unwillingly he went out on a lead held by Judy on her bicycle. That was considered good for his figure and he hated it. Sometimes he watched Meg hitting the hockey ball he was never allowed to touch, and sometimes he watched Ralph kicking the huge great football that was far too large for any dog's mouth and therefore not worth attempting to steal. If he could he went everywhere with Karen, slept under her bed, and helped her to

practise by keeping his head on the loud pedal, giving a moan now and again to show he was listening.

The autumn term saw changes for every one. Ralph and Judy passed their junior certificates and were moved into their respective fifth forms with the school certificate their next objective. Meg was transferred to her senior school and began her hockey. Karen was moved up to the top form of the junior school. She must really begin to take her lessons more seriously, her form mistress said. It was childish to spell so badly when one was practically eleven. Couldn't someone help her at home with it? She had hardly any homework so there must be plenty of time.

Plenty of time. . . . Karen, murmuring that she would try, thought: 'If you only knew . . .'

Rosalba had come back hot foot for the festival. She had misread the syllabus, just as Karen had at first, and was rather staggered to find that all six pieces had to be learnt, not just one of the groups of three. It was not, however, until November; there was loads of time, she said, in her charming complaining voice. Karen, with that good memory of hers, would take no time to get them by heart and of course she would play them beautifully; and if she won the thirty shillings she, Rosalba, would double it.

'Oh, *thank* you,' murmured Karen, husky with joy. Three pounds. That would be a lot towards the piano of her own.

She began to work as hard as she possibly could. The Pachulski and Rébikoff pieces turned out to be not so difficult after all. They were different from any music she had tried, but Rosalba learnt them herself and played them, and she imitated her as faithfully as she could.

One morning in early November she gave them with great effect on the churchwarden's piano, with the new way of picking up her hands that Rosalba had brought back from the studio in Paris where she had spent two



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months. You raised them as high as you could, brought them down on the tips of the fingers, as stiff as possible, then let them sort of collapse, as if they had no bones. That, at least, was how Karen explained it to Hemsey.

‘Well, you do seem more free with it all somehow,’

said Miss Hemans, and put the toffee on the piano. Karen had been haunting the parish hall of late in the hope of seeing Derry, and Hemsey was pleased to have her back. 'You do what you like with your 'ands, lovey, s' long as you don't 'urt the pianny.'

'Derry wouldn't say it was like a fly taking a walk now, would he?' said Karen. She stopped a moment to think how much she wished he would walk in and hear her and tell her she had improved. 'I see a difference. Honest, I do.' He would say more than that now, surely.

'Mr James 'as a young lady now. Very taken up with 'er,' observed Miss Hemans, rather as if Derry would never notice flies taking walks again. 'Ever s' nice she is.'

Karen could not see what that had to do with it. In another three weeks her festival would be over. If only she could play to Derry before that. Rosalba was a darling, of course, pleased with everything, ready to clap her hands and cry 'lovely' after every piece, but she wanted Derry too. She wanted to hear him say: 'You *have* come on'—something like that, anyway. As she explained to Hemsey, he was different from darling Rosalba, different, even, from Aunt Anne. He really knew. Probably the adju. . . .—there was no getting her tongue round the word—would be very like Derry. It would be a sort of rehearsal to play to him.

Miss Hemans straightened her hat and said she would pass a remark. 'Wouldn't 'urt for me to do that. Just to pass a little remark about yer festival.'

She passed it with good effect. Very soon after, Karen came into the parish hall to find Derry, the piano with its top open, filling the place with great resounding chords.

'Come in,' he called as soon as he saw her. He wove his harmonies into a lovely drawn-out cadence and came to a full close; then he got up and put the pile of parish magazines back on the piano stool. 'There you are. Now come and let's hear about this festival of yours. What have you got to play?'

Karen pulled the syllabus out of the top of her stocking where she had put it every morning for weeks in the hope of seeing him. She found the place and he read it through carefully.

'H'm. Very nice all-round collection. Let's see how you're getting on. What will you do? Play 'em all to me?'

'No. You pretend to be the adju. and pick out two.'

That picking out two pieces—drawing lots for them—was going to be such a fearful thrill. Only five minutes before the competition began. No time to even *think* them through again before you might be playing them.

'Right, I'll draw lots. Put the names in a hat. No. No time for that. You be a re-called candidate and I'll,' he read from the syllabus, 'I'll select an additional piece from either group for re-called candidates.'

'Oh, yes.' Karen knew all about re-called candidates now. It meant you had a good chance for the prize. 'I'll be re-called.'

'Very well, I'll select . . .' He shut his eyes and made passes with his hands. 'I'll have the Bach, please.'

It would be that, of course. Just the piece she played worst. Rosalba did not like Bach and nor did Karen.

'Oh, Derry, wouldn't you rather have the Chopin? It's so lovely. The Bach is fearfully dull——'

'You be quiet. If you argue with the adjudicator you get hounded out of the hall with the police after you. Up and at it, please.'

They never got further than that one piece. Derry began by sitting half-way down the hall. After a very short time he got up, darted down the gangway, and sprang up on to the platform.

'I say,' he said, and swept her hands off the keyboard, 'you can't play Bach like that.'

Karen's jaw dropped.

'What . . . how d' you mean. . . .'

'You can't go using the pedal like that. Your left hand is simply frightful. Play it alone.'

'But I . . .'

Rosalba never asked for the left hand alone.

'Play the left hand alone clean through and keep your foot off the pedal. Where's your music?'

It was on one of the chairs in the hall, in the nice blue leather case Rosalba had given her.

'I don't want the music. I always play by heart. Rosalba says——'

'You get it and look at it, my infant, and don't think any old notes will do.'

So she fetched her music and played the left hand alone, Derry shouting 'keep off it' every time her foot touched the pedal. It was a dreadful business. He stopped her for every mistake and she made one in every bar. He made her play one passage seven times till she got it right. He marked with large crosses the places where she went wrong. Here and there he wrote in fingering, like the grey-haired man in the orchestra.

'Oh, how awful,' gasped Karen, when at last it came to a miserable end.

'No, it isn't awful. You stick to it and you'll do it all right. I expect the other pieces are good enough, but you just can't go skating over Bach. He doesn't allow it. You take my advice and play the left hand alone for a fortnight.'

'But it's only a fortnight to the festival.'

'Well, then, ten days. After that you put the hands together and it'll be as right as rain.'

'Let me play the Chopin to you.'

If only he would settle down and listen; let her play beautifully to him and then say: 'I see a difference. . . .'

'No, I can't stop now. I'm sure you're all right with it. Grand to have learnt all that lot of stuff.'

'Have I—have I come on?'

'Oh, rather. Like anything since I heard you. Just one thing . . .' He seemed to hesitate. 'Don't you go putting on frills, I mean when you're playing. You're a nice keen kid, just sit still and play the right notes and be done with it—you know what I mean. I'd come along to the festival and hear you only your class is on the Saturday, isn't it, and I'm giving a lesson. Sorry I can't wait now. Good luck.'

He jumped down from the platform and was gone.

Karen sat quite still, thinking. He had said she had come on, that it was grand to have all those pieces ready. That was something. If only he hadn't hit on the Bach. Aunt Anne was always down on her left hand, but Aunt Anne was away and it was a month since she had been to Sharpset. Rosalba never seemed to notice it one way or the other.

But supposing the adjudicator when he cast lots—supposing the adjudicator hit on it too. . . .



Staggered by that awful thought Karen returned to the passage Derry had made her play seven times and played it seven times more. It got slightly better. There was nothing for it. She must take Derry's advice and practise that hand alone and all the passages he had marked. Derry *knew*.

## CHAPTER XV

### THE FESTIVAL

THEY were having eggs for tea in honour of Karen's festival. Her class was to be heard at seven o'clock. They were all going to support her, even Biddy, leaving Benjie to take care of the house, which he did exceedingly well, barking like a kennelful of dogs if he heard a sound.

'You must be sure to see that your bedroom doors are shut,' said Mrs Forrest, pouring out for Ralph and Meg; the others had not yet appeared. 'You know what Benjie is.'

Sleeping on beds was Benjie's secret vice. When left alone in the house he went from room to room having forty winks on each in turn like the child in the *Three Bears*.

'All right, mum. I'll hop round last thing,' said Ralph. 'Anyhow, there's heaps of time.'

'I can't think what's happened to Judy,' said Mrs Forrest. 'She can't be helping Karen to dress all this time.'

'Oh, can't she!' said Meg, significantly. 'Have you seen it?'

Ralph looked up from his egg.

'Seen what?'

'The dress.'

'What's it like?'

'Black velvet.'

'Cripes! With bugles?'

'Don't be silly,' said Mrs Forrest. 'It's a very nice dress. Quite simple, even if it is black. It was very kind of Rosalba to give it to her.'

'Oh, well, if it's *given* . . .' said Ralph, reassured. 'Anyway, it'll do for mourning.'

'I don't know that it's any worse than the red one,' said Meg. 'But have you seen her hair?'

'No, what's she done to it? Dyed it?'

'You're being ridiculous, both of you,' said their mother, anxiously however, for she had not seen Karen since lunch. She had darted out directly she had swallowed her last mouthful, saying Rosalba wanted her but she didn't know what for, and danced in only ten minutes before tea with the cardboard box containing her new dress under her arm.

'Of course they haven't done anything to her hair. She has probably been having it washed—shampooed. Most extravagant of Rosalba.'

'Washed!' Meg snorted. 'It's waved.'

'*Not* permed!' For a moment Mrs Forrest was shaken out of her usual calm. Then she recovered herself. Rosalba was a person of taste. Also there had been no time for a long process like that. Also, of course, she would never dream of doing such a lasting affair without asking leave.

'No, of course not,' she answered herself. 'Don't go putting ideas into my head. I expect she has just had it properly done for once and it's taken a wave.'

'You don't catch Karen's hair taking anything like that. It's dead straight. But it's been water-waved, whatever that is. Judy thinks it's lovely. She's all over it, and the dress too.'

Meg was nothing if not fair-minded. How Judy could encourage this kind of thing she could not imagine. She herself would have taken the wettest, hardest brush she could find and got the waves out as quick as possible. But then nothing would have induced her to wear the black velvet dress either, whereas Judy was green with envy—or so she said.

‘Oh, well,’ said Mrs Forrest, ‘I dare say it’s a good thing to look as nice as you can if you play the piano. Anyway, Karen had nothing to wear. She has grown out of everything.’

The door opened and Judy ushered Karen in, like a showman announcing a performing animal.

‘Miss Karen Forrest.’

Rosalba had dressed her in new things from top to toe. She had new shoes, a new petticoat under the velvet dress; every single thing she wore was new, down to her vest, which was blue for luck.

Her hair, instead of being brushed back from her bumpy forehead in its usual way, was waved as much as its length would allow and surmounted by a huge bow.

‘Darling! . . .’ breathed her mother, taken aback. Karen looked, somehow, so unlike herself.

‘Isn’t she simply grand?’ said Judy, with a showman’s pride.

‘Did the hairdresser give you the bow for your hair, darling?’



'No, I did that,' said Judy. 'Don't you like it?'

'It's fearful,' said Meg solemnly. 'Simply fearful.'

Karen looked at them all, beaming. She had not looked in the glass and she had no idea there was anything unusual about her. All she knew was that she had had a wonderful day with darling Rosalba, being given presents as if it was Christmas. She had never known anything like it.

Judy looked doubtfully at her handiwork.

'What do you think, Ralph?'

'It's a bit off, that bow,' he said with a judicial air.

'Yes, I agree,' said his mother. 'Let's take it away.'

The bow was untied and Karen's hair fell into its ordinary position.

'Oh, all right,' said Judy, and attacked her egg philosophically. 'Have it your own way. I don't believe you've got a scrap of taste, any of you.'

Karen was glad to be rid of the bow. It was inclined to flap about when she moved her head. Anyway, it didn't matter. Nothing mattered. She had played all the six pieces to old Mrs Mersey-White that afternoon, on the Steinway with the lid open, and the old lady said it was beautiful and that she was sure to get the prize with all the help Rosalba was giving her. Now all she was longing for was seven o'clock, time to begin.

'I've just heard from Aunt Anne. She's coming up from Sharpset to hear you, Karen. She rang up Mr Bell to say so.' Mr Bell was the grocer next door who good-naturedly took telephone messages for them.

'Oh, how lovely!' cried Karen. That Aunt Anne should be there was just the lovely last golden straw. Aunt Anne would be pleased, she knew. She had got that left hand much better. She still hoped that the

choice would not fall on the Bach, anything rather than that; still, if it did she could manage. Derry's advice had been good. Derry *knew* all right.

She gave Benjie a good-bye kiss, and he gave her two or three thumps with his tail for good luck. The soup for their supper was left in the saucepan ready to hot up the moment they came in. Then she remembered she had no handkerchief and she had to tear upstairs for it. After that she was ready; she put on the same fur gloves that Rosalba had lent her for the Women's Institute concert, Ralph seized the blue case with her music, and they were off.

They found Rosalba, in a fur coat and no hat, frowning in the doorway of the hall where the festival was being held. She had kept places for them, she said, and someone had come who she thought might be their Aunt Anne. Whoever it was she was sitting there waiting for them. They were none too early, and had Karen kept her hands warm, and was she sure she hadn't forgotten any of her music? Would she look in her case and see? Karen looked and there it all was, safe and sound, but, as she said, it didn't matter anyway because she was playing it all by heart.

They went into the hall and sat in a long row; Rosalba in the gangway seat, Mrs Forrest next, then Ralph, Judy, Meg, and Aunt Anne—seven of them. It was a long time before Rosalba settled down. She had four programmes for them, already marked with a large cross against Karen's name and number. The competitors were all given numbers, chosen by lot like the two pieces. She was to listen for her number and when it was called out that meant she had to go and play on the

enormous piano on the platform. She must be sure to hear it.

‘I see,’ said Mrs Forrest, when Rosalba had explained all this. ‘We ’ll all listen. You may be sure we won’t let her miss it.’

‘And Karen must sit at the end of the row so that she can get out quickly,’ said Rosalba urgently.

‘I don’t think that matters,’ came from Aunt Anne, in a large calm voice. ‘She can sit here by me and slip past these people very easily.’ There were three people between her and the end of the row.

‘Oh, very well,’ said Rosalba, worriedly, ‘if you really think so.’

‘I really do,’ said Aunt Anne with her bland smile, and Karen sat down beside her.

‘Here, Karen, hang on to your music.’

Ralph passed the blue case down the line to her.

‘Don’t hold that heavy case,’ said Rosalba. ‘Don’t touch it, darling. It’ll tire your wrist *Never* hold anything’

‘Never? That ’s a little difficult, isn’t it?’ Aunt Anne gave a sniff and pulled out a bag of peardrops. ‘With Mrs Bent’s love. Have one, and remember, Karen, whatever you do, don’t *fuss*.’

‘I ’m not fussing,’ said Karen, and took a peardrop. What was the matter with Rosalba? It was like the audition all over again

‘No, I know you ’re not,’ said Aunt Anne. ‘Why should you? Nothing on earth to fuss about. Let ’s see where you come. Where ’s your number?’

‘Page fourteen,’ said Rosalba, seizing the programme out of Aunt Anne’s hand ‘There it is Her number is seven. It ’s a lucky number—makes such a difference.’

A man came to the edge of the platform.

'S-sh, he's going to announce the draw. Which piece, you know.'

Karen clasped her hands together. She could hardly believe her ears. The lot had fallen on the Mendelssohn in the first group and the Chopin waltz in the second—the two things she loved best. 'Oh, hooray, hooray, hooray,' she breathed into Aunt Anne's ear.

'Number one,' called the man.

'They're beginning,' gasped Rosalba; and with a whispered 'Good luck' to Karen she rushed to her place at the end of the row.

The adjudicator was sitting at a table covered with papers in the gangway, half way down the hall. He had grey hair and bushy eyebrows; that much Karen had seen when he stood up to beckon to someone. 'Right,' he said, in a nice ordinary sort of voice, and nodded to the man on the platform.

The first three candidates were girls of nearly sixteen. To Karen they seemed very nearly grown-up. The first one looked very shy and she played the Mendelssohn in a shy way, though she made no mistakes. She seemed rather afraid of the Chopin too. Every one clapped her when she had done but she only smiled thankfully as if she were glad to get it over. The next two were good, Karen thought; but after them came a boy of twelve or so with a round dark head and a long nose. He dashed into the waltz, taking it much faster than the other three and playing it much louder. He fairly took Karen's breath away and at first she thought him wonderful. Then he began to lose his way; he repeated a bar and took a wrong turning that led him back to the very beginning of the piece. Then he floundered and skipped a bit, and



all he could do was to play faster and faster. Karen seized Aunt Anne by the hand. 'He's wrong. Oh, *poor* boy, he's gone wrong.' She longed to help him.

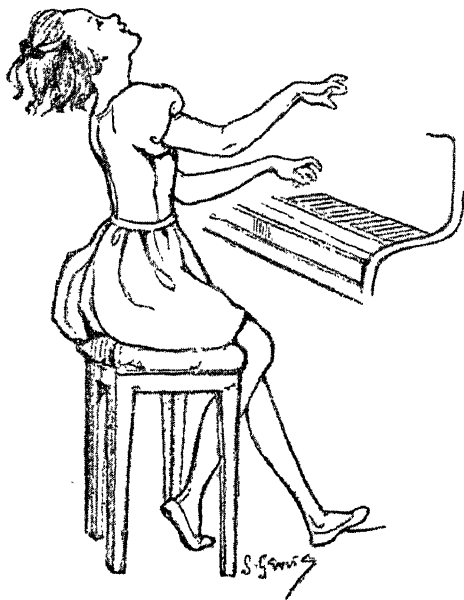
'Start again,' said the adjudicator in a calm voice. He gave a worried grin and began again, this time playing it beautifully from beginning to end.

'There,' said Aunt Anne. 'You see what happens if you lose your head. He could play it perfectly—though he had no business to go galloping through it at that pace.'

They clapped him all the more because he had broken down, and the next one began. She was good, too; no wrong notes, no hesitations. They were all good, in fact, but, Karen said to herself, Rosalba would not think much of them. She would say they were dull. She would use her favourite word, which Karen never understood, and say they had no 'personality.' What exactly that was Karen did not know, but she could see for herself that these people were very unlike Rosalba. They sat so still; they none of them swayed to the music as she did; they none of them tried the piano over with an arpeggio. None of them, in fact, did any of the extra things that she did. Karen felt sorry for them, not having had the luck to be taught by darling Rosalba. Number five had a mop of hair as curly as Judy's and the audience applauded her more than any one. She was better; she smiled and bowed in rather more Rosalba's way. Number six looked older than any of them. She was a big heavy girl who sat down to the piano very quietly and played in a way of her own. 'I like her,' thought Karen. 'I'd like her to go on and on.' She was the first one to make the piano sing. Suddenly its tone was beautiful, and Karen was reminded

of Miriam Hals. The audience liked her too; they clapped her quite as much as the curly-headed one, though she took very little notice of them. An unsmiling, interesting sort of girl.

'Number seven,' called the man from the platform, and Ralph leant forward to remind Karen that seven



was her number. She mustn't be a little cuckoo and forget to go up there and play. He felt suddenly responsible for her. Supposing she broke down like that ass of a boy! How awful that would be! But no, she seemed all right. She hopped up as if she was quite pleased to go, and sat down to the piano. She had a handkerchief—thank goodness it was a clean one—with which she seemed to be rubbing her hands like a

fly cleaning its back legs. Having done that she put it on the side of the piano and played a perky little bit before getting off on her piece. The handkerchief business seemed to be an extra; no one else had done it, anyway. The piece itself was going pretty well. Ralph was getting to know it having heard it six times, and as far as he could see she was getting down to it all right; very like the others to listen to, of course, but not at all like them to look at. Quite extraordinarily unlike, in fact. She was moving all the time; sometimes her head came down nearly to her hands, for all the world as if she was going into a football scrum. Was that the thing to do? Perhaps it was. People had all sorts of tricks when they were bowling and that was considered rather good. Characteristic action, they called it. The audience applauded after the Mendelssohn and Karen got up and bowed, or rather gave the little curtsey that Rosalba had taught her, and sat down again. No one else had done that and Ralph felt slightly uncomfortable. Someone ought to tell the kid that it looked rather too like asking people to clap. She wouldn't think of it herself, of course, but if every one else sat tight she ought to. And the playing of the little twiddly bits before beginning properly, wasn't that perhaps showing off? He must find out. It was bad luck on the kid to let her do it if it wasn't quite good form. He looked at Rosalba. She was leaning forward, gazing at Karen with what Ralph thought a silly expression, clapping wildly. He felt uncomfortable again. It might be all right for music but that wasn't the way you got taught anything else. Did Rosalba know as much as she let on? Was she any good? Look at the way she had fussed at the door. Enough to put any one off, let alone a kid only just

eleven. The second piece began. No fear of Karen breaking down, she was fairly walking into it and grinning like anything. But what a queer action she had—that way of pawing the air like a dog swimming. It was over and the audience was clapping and laughing. They seemed to be amused. Why? It wasn't supposed to be funny, was it? Perhaps it was only because she was a bit younger. Ralph clapped as loud as he could. Jolly good effort. Good kid. He decided to give her half a crown for her piano money.

'Number eight,' called the man from the platform. Karen's moment was over.

She sat down, panting a little, at the end of a row behind the others. It had been glorious, like running a race, like learning to dive; she had never done anything half so exciting in her life. She would wait there till the adjudicator told them who were the re-called candidates. He had said he would announce that after the last player. They were to play again that evening at nine o'clock. She wondered how many would be re-called. Not the boy, certainly, and not the first girl. She herself might have just a chance. At all events she had never played so well in her life. She had remembered to smile when she was playing the waltz. She had remembered almost everything. Rosalba had leant forward and caught her eye and clapped, so she was pleased and that was what mattered most. Darling Rosalba.

Number nine finished and the adjudicator made his way on to the platform. He had had a long day, listening and listening, his critical faculties full stretch all the time. His grey hair was on end and his grey eyebrows bushier than ever as he stood there, a sheaf of papers in his

hand. However, he had something interesting and often nice to say about everybody. Number one must have a bit more confidence; she had a nice touch and a good left hand, but her playing had no life in it. The boy, he said, let the music run away with him. He must learn control and try again next year. The big girl had the best tone he had heard yet from any one in the festival, and so on.

Then he came to number seven.

'This little girl—' he said in his pleasant voice, shaking his shaggy head, 'this little girl is going to get a bad shock, I'm afraid. I can't give any marks at all to a player with such terrible style. She must get rid of all the fuss, all the frills and furbelows, all these dreadful airs and graces, and let the music she undoubtedly . . .'

Karen lost his voice, deafened by a noise like a thousand kettles singing in her ears. Her heart beat as if she had had a sudden dreadful fright. An enormous blush spread over her from her heels to her head. He was talking about her—Karen—and what on earth was he saying? Something about simplicity and affectation—long words she knew nothing about. Couldn't she get away? She was at the end of a row. Her one idea was to escape from this awful voice from the platform that said things about her she could not understand. She wasn't crying yet but in another minute she would be, a sob was half choking her.

She got up quietly, slipped down the side gangway, through the swing doors, and out into the street. Then she took to her heels and ran and ran.

## CHAPTER XVI

### AFTER THE DISASTER

WHERE was she running? She knew exactly—to Derry. Derry had used that same awful word ‘frills.’ He had said: ‘Don’t you go putting on frills when you’re playing.’ He had said that the day she played to him on the churchwarden’s piano, the time he had made her tackle the Bach properly. And something about ‘play the right notes and be done with it.’ But what did he mean? That was what she must ask him. She *had* played the right notes, hardly a wrong one. That awful voice from the platform had talked about ‘frills and furbelows.’ If any one could tell her what the things were it would be Derry. No marks at all. *No marks at all.* Derry would tell her why she couldn’t get any marks at all. He would be in the church giving his organ lesson. He had said he would come to the festival only it was Saturday and he had to give an organ lesson. She ran along the street in her velvet dress and her new shoes as fast as she could go.

Derry had finished with his last pupil and was enjoying himself playing the great Toccata in F, almost his favourite Bach, with his fiancée, Jennifer, on the organ stool beside him. He had reached the last page and was thundering out the dominant ‘C’ pedal notes with the mighty chords crashing out in answer to them, when Karen slipped into the church. She crept as close to the organ loft as she could go.

'Derry,' whispered Jennifer, 'there's a little girl behind you. Do you know her?'

'No, but let her stay if she likes. Listen, this is the sixteen-foot reed. Hear it?'

Derry took his hands off the manual leaving the music to reverberate and linger in the dark roof of the church.

He sighed with sheer joy. 'Oh, that's *fine*! Nothing like old J. S. B.'

'Derry, she's crying—whoever she is.'

Derry swung round, sliding his legs over the long organ stool.

'My goodness, it's Karen.'

Karen seized Derry's hand when he stretched it out like a drowning man seizing a rope. 'We can't talk in here,' he said, and in no time she was out of the church and sitting in a car squashed between him and someone he called Jennifer.

'Now then, Karen, turn off the waterworks. This is Jennifer's car and you're making it all wet.'

'I think she's cold,' said Jennifer, in a cosy voice. 'Every one cries when they're cold.' She wrapped Karen in a rug and slipped an arm round her. 'There, isn't that better?'

Karen said 'Yes, it was,' and began to feel slightly comforted.

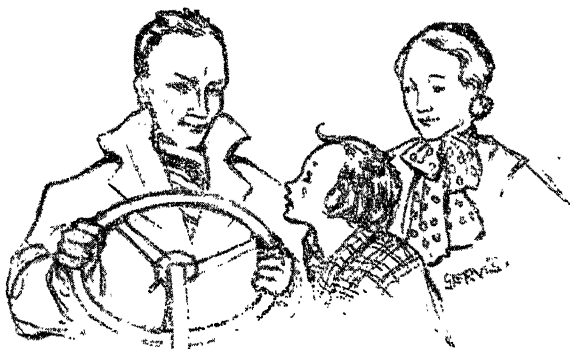
'Now then, let's hear what's happened and what you're doing running all over the place without a coat.'

'The fes—festival . . .' gulped Karen.

'Oh, yes, of course. You've been playing in your festival to-day. You haven't won your class, is that it? But whoever thought you would?'

'No, no.' Karen shook her head vehemently. She hadn't ever thought of winning. It was much worse

than that. By degrees Derry and Jennifer got it out of her. 'This little girl is going to get a great shock . . . no marks at all . . .' and then all about the frills and furbelows and airs and graces. 'What are frills? You said yourself I wasn't to put them on when I was playing. But I didn't put anything on. I played all the right notes. I didn't break down like the boy. . . . No marks *at all*. . . .' She wept again. She couldn't get over the 'no marks at all.'



Sitting there in the dim light from the car's dashboard, with Jennifer putting in a sensible word where she could, Derry tried to explain what the adjudicator meant and also why he was quite right. All Rosalba's little games, all the bowing and swaying, frowning and smiling, waving your hands about—all that had nothing to do with music. That sort of thing, in fact, only got in the way. 'It's as if you put a lovely picture into a great vulgar frame, it's as if you poured treacle over a strawberry ice, it's as if—you tell her, Jen.' He felt he could kick himself for not having told her that she was beginning to play in a style that was a mass of affectation, a



style that no decent adjudicator would put up with for one moment. He ought to have said what he thought that morning instead of putting in a rotten remark about frills that she couldn't make head or tail of. But the old doctor who judged had been rather severe.

'I expect that old adjudicator of yours wanted his dinner. He'd had a bit too much of that Chopin waltz. Don't let's worry about his remarks any more,' he said, when at last explanations came to an end. 'Let's think what you're going to do now. Give it all up?'

Screams of 'No, no!' from Karen put an end to that fearful idea.

'All right then, take a deep breath and begin all over again. No good going on with this Rosalba of yours, that's one thing certain.'

Jennifer gave a breathless gasp.

'Oh, Derry, I've got an idea. D'you think Sonia would take her?'

'Sonia? Sonia Brand?' Derry seemed amazed. 'Sonia doesn't teach, surely.'

'She does, a little. I've heard she is fearfully good as long as people are keen. She's going to be here this winter. Then she's going to give two recitals in London, and go on to America.'

'I see . . .' Derry seemed to ponder. 'Well, it's an idea, certainly.' He looked at Karen as if she was not there and said: 'She has an ear all right, and a pretty useful memory.'

Jennifer gave Karen a squeeze. 'Hear that? That's a lot for Derry to say, if you only knew. I tell you what, let's go somewhere and telephone to Sonia and see what she says.'

'Right. We'll go back to mother. It's no distance.'

‘And after that we ’ll take Karen home.’

Derry started up the car and Karen, comfortably tucked up between them, Jennifer’s arm still round her, wondered in a vague way what was happening. She was still trying to take in the fact that Derry thought Rosalba’s way of playing all wrong and that she had got no marks because she had imitated her. ‘You shouldn’t imitate, anyhow,’ he had said. Apparently they were now going somewhere to find someone else, someone called Sonia.

She asked Derry in a small voice: ‘Who is Sonia?’

‘Sonia? She ’s a real, proper pianist.’

‘Like Miriam Hals?’ ventured Karen.

‘Well, no, I wouldn’t quite say that,’ answered Derry judicially. ‘Miriam Hals is perhaps in the first half-dozen, and Sonia isn’t that. But not far off. She gets a lot of work, concerts all over the place, Amsterdam, Vienna——’

Karen gasped.

‘But she ’d never teach me!’ She was terrified at the idea.

‘She might. She might be interested. You ’re musical. I believe you ’re worth teaching, honest I do.’

There! He had said it again. ‘I see a difference, honest I do.’ Karen’s courage began to ooze back. It was like a drink on a thirsty day to hear Derry say ‘honest I do.’ How wonderful it would be to have a teacher like that, someone like Derry himself, who *knew*.

Then she remembered Rosalba.

‘I don’t think I ’d better leave Rosalba. Perhaps she wouldn’t like it. I ’d better wait and see what she says.’

‘Well . . .’ Derry seemed to be trying to collect himself. ‘It ’s rather difficult. I expect all this feels to

you a bit disloyal to her, doesn't it? As a matter of fact I shouldn't say too much if I were you. Don't repeat what the adjudicator said about the frills——'

'But, Derry, she was *there*.'

'Oh, was she?' Derry gave a long, perturbed whistle. 'A pity. It doesn't do any good. She was doing her best for you, I suppose.'

'Rosalba's a darling, she's done everything for me,' cried Karen. She felt hot all over at this criticizing of Rosalba.

'You needn't worry. She'll be pleased if she hears there's a chance of your being taught by Sonia. No one could possibly mind being left for a person like that. After all, Rosalba—oughtn't I to be calling her Miss Something, by the way—Rosalba is an amateur and Sonia is a professional. She has given her life to music. She earns her bread and butter by it. Don't you go comparing them at all.'

'No, I won't,' said Karen fervently. She didn't mean to have Rosalba put into the shade by any Sonia, no matter how wonderful she was.

They arrived. 'This is Karen,' said Derry to his mother, who turned out to be a kindly, stoutish person who did not ask too many questions but produced chocolate biscuits and a cup of cocoa for Karen by the fire. Where did she live? They must ring up her mother at once for fear she should be wondering where she was. Karen explained about Mr Bell who took messages and Derry went off into the passage to telephone. Mrs James then took out her knitting and sank cosily into a chair while Jennifer talked about Sonia.

It was comforting the way these people seemed to take it for granted that music was a serious business.

It wasn't a lovely music-room like Rosalba's, but the grand piano at the far end was open and had music piled up on it, besides the open book on its stand. There was a double violin stand in one corner and a cello laid on its side under the piano. Music lives here, Karen said to herself; this is its home, where it is made. She decided that it was a perfect room.

Derry came back. Mr Bell had taken the message all right. 'Now let's get down to business. What about fees, Karen? What have you been paying?'

Karen opened her eyes wide.

'Nothing. Rosalba gave me lessons.'

'Very good of her, too,' said Mrs James. 'She must be a very nice woman.'

'Oh, she is. Rosalba is a darling,' cried Karen. 'If only you knew her!'

Derry explained.

'Yes, but you see, she's well-off. Sonia has her living to make. You'll be a professional when you're grown-up, I suppose. You'll have to earn your living, won't you?'

'Oh, yes, I shall.' Mrs Forrest always made that clear. 'We're all going to. Judy's going to be a secretary and Meg's——'

'That's what I mean. Well, now, how much do you think your mother can afford?'

Karen's face fell. Music was an extra and there was no money for extras.

'Well—I don't know. I'll have to ask Ralph what he thinks.' Then she remembered her own piano money. 'But I've got two pounds eighteen myself.' She had just had a birthday and Mr Fergusson had come down handsomely in tips at the end of the holidays.

'Good. Can you make that up to three guineas? I believe Sonia would give you a trial trip for three guineas.'

'Oh, yes.' Karen was sure she could. She would borrow from Ralph and pay it back at Christmas.

'Right,' said Derry. 'Come on, Jen, let's ring up Sonia and make her take the kid. She must. You persuade her. Spread the honey thick.'

Jennifer slipped her arm into his and they went into the passage outside. The door was open and Karen and Mrs James sat over the fire, listening to every word.

Jennifer began. Evidently it was not too easy.

'... yes, but, Sonia, do try her. She's a darling little girl——'

Derry seized the receiver.

'Shut up, Jen. She doesn't want darling little girls, she wants 'em clever.' He tried himself. 'I say, Sonia, Derry speaking now. I believe this kid is going to be interesting to you. She's got an ear, she really has, and an amazing memory. Awful style now, all wrong, but she's only eleven and the music's there. She's chock-full of it, I promise you she is. Do give her a chance.'

There was a long pause while the person at the other end did the talking. Derry said nothing but 'Yes. No. Right. Of course. Three. Yes. Good. Oh, hooray. Thank you. Thanks awfully. *Splendid.*'

They came back into the room, still arm in arm, this time with beaming smiles.

'Done it. She'll take you, Karen. Six months, anyhow, and then see how you've got on. And you'll get on like a house on fire, I bet you will. Jen and I will drive you up there, and she'll hear you and fix up——'

Mrs James interrupted with, 'The front door. I hear the bell. Go and answer it, Derry, will you.'

The door was opened and a bundle of black fur shot in, tore down the passage with a scrabbling of four feet, and hurled itself at Karen.

'Oh, Benjie—Benjie darling!'

At last he had found her, his own Karen. Benjie's tail wagged his whole body, so joyful was he. He bundled round the room, rather too fat now, wagging all over and sniffing every one to say how d'you do; then he returned to Karen and sat down beside her, his tongue hanging out with joy.

'What a grand dog—the champion tail-wagger of three counties, I should imagine,' said Jennifer.

'Someone has come to fetch you,' said Derry, and brought Biddy into the room. In her green hat and long coat she seemed bigger than ever.

'Oh, Biddy darling,' cried Karen, and flung her arms round her neck because she was so pleased to see her again. These people were very nice and kind but Biddy was someone from home.

'Benjie is Karen's dog, I suppose?' said Mrs James, looking at Benjie, who was lying on his back, all four feet in the air.

'Och, it is,' answered Biddy. 'She fills his eye just



and I had to bring him. He's lying that way because he's a bad dog.'

Benjie, it appeared, had been on Karen's bed. She had left her door open. 'Oh, that was when I went to fetch my handkerchief,' thought Karen—and she needn't have bothered. Those things didn't matter, after all.

'He's the thief of the world, that same Benjie.' Biddy shook her head over him. 'Up on her bed and then didn't he get the soup I had for their supper.'

'Sonia likes dogs,' said Derry. 'Good. We'll take Benjie along to the first lesson.'

'Is it lessons?' Biddy cocked an ear.

'I'll tell you all about it in a moment, Biddy. How is every one? Did they . . . Are they . . .' Karen couldn't bring herself to say: 'Are they very angry with me?'

'They're sticking together, just,' said Biddy, with a broad grin. 'They've your supper kept for ye and yer Aunt Anne waitin' on ye, and 'deed and ye'll be welcome.'

'That's all right, then,' said Mrs James, and came to the door to see them off. 'Tell your mother Derry will be coming round to explain about Sonia Brand—who she is and everything else.'

'And she'll be wishful to thank ye,' said Biddy, in her politest voice, 'the way ye telephoned and all.'

'Yes, thank you, thank you,' cried Karen, and found herself kissing them. The evening which had been so dreadful was ending so happily.

She hooked her arm in Biddy's and Benjie pranced and jumped and ran in circles round them as they walked along.

Biddy tried to be severe.

'Ye 're a bad wee girl runnin' off the way we 'd think ye dead and gone, but sure the ould demon with grey whiskers on him was enough to send any one runnin' to the end of the world.'

'Tell me what happened, Biddy darling, after I had gone. What did every one say? What did Rosalba say? Oh, what ever *did* Rosalba say?'



## CHAPTER XVII

### THE FAMILY RALLY ROUND

RALPH hardly knew which way to look. Golly, the poor kid had got it in the neck—all about the frills and furbelows. What an expression! What was a furbelow, anyway? In front of all these people, too. When Judy whispered, 'He doesn't seem to think much of Karen, does he,' he hissed back at her: 'Shut up. It's not her fault.' When Meg leant across Judy and murmured in her calm voice, 'Rotten coaching. That's what it is,' he nodded his head violently. Just what he had been afraid of. All the hullabaloo was bad form, not characteristic action like bowling, but dashed bad style. Someone ought to have told her. As Meg said, it was rotten coaching.

The adjudicator finished his criticism. It had been an interesting class and considerable talent had come to light, 'Not least in the youngest candidate, in spite of her faults of style.'

'Hope she got that,' whispered Ralph to his mother, and looked round to wink at Karen. She wasn't to be seen. Gone to a different row, evidently.

No one would be re-called that night, went on the adjudicator, because one candidate was outstanding, number six. She would be asked to play the Bach and the Chopin at the final concert, and he wished her every success.

The audience clapped, got up, and began to move

away. The Forrest family also stood up and, as one man, looked round for Karen. Then, to their surprise, the adjudicator came bustling down the gangway.

'I want to see the little girl, number seven. The little girl in the black velvet dress. Where is she?'

'Hi, mum,' whispered Ralph, who heard him, and tweaked his mother's sleeve to get her attention. 'The old cock is asking for Karen.'

Mrs Forrest, who was talking earnestly to Rosalba, looked up to say: 'Go and find her, then.'

'Meg, go and hunt up the kid, will you,' said Ralph, and went up to the doctor. 'She's my sister, sir. We're getting her for you.'

'Yes, please do. I want to tell her what I meant. She mustn't mind what I said. Where's her father or mother or someone? Can I see them, too?'

Ralph pointed out their mother and the adjudicator hurried up to her. He plunged in without any preliminary. 'Now, look here, that child of yours is full of music. I should think quite probably she's the most musical person in this hall. Can't you get her properly taught?'

Judy giggled. She said afterwards it was nerves. She couldn't help it, Rosalba's face had been so awful to watch.

'You are very kind,' said Mrs Forrest, trying to stop him. 'I'm glad you think her musical.'

'I don't think. I know. Even that ghastly style couldn't hide it. Really, I think you ought to give her some good lessons——'

'A friend has been most kindly helping her——' began Mrs Forrest, and then Rosalba saved her further worry by cutting in with: 'I'm afraid I'm her teacher.'

As Judy said, describing it to Karen, after that it was the adjudicator's turn to have a face worth watching.

'Oh, oh, er—er—well, you must forgive me,' and he ran his hands through his hair till it bristled up like a badger's. 'I hate to see talent going wrong, and it *is* wrong, you know. I'm sorry, but it is. Well, well, I must be off. Got to be back at nine. Good-bye, good-bye. Interesting child, that. Got personality, too.'

Judy said he shook them all by the hand, any one he could find, he was so confused at having said all that about the bad style with Rosalba there listening.

Then Meg came back to them.

'I can't find Karen.'

'Can't find her? But she must be here.'

'I've got her coat, it was still hanging up in the cloak-room where she had left it.'

Meg had the coat over her arm, incontestable proof that Karen was not wearing it.

'Well, then, she must be still here.'

'No, the man at the door says a girl in a black dress went out a long time ago.'

'But why should that be Karen? Lots of girls wear black dresses.'

'Black velvet dress, he said.'

'Ralph, you look for her. And you try, too, Judy. It's a big place. I'll go round to the back of the stage.'

In the excitement of hunting for Karen they none of them noticed that Rosalba had slipped away. Aunt Anne, waiting for them in the outer hall, told them.

'Miss Mersey-White has gone. She said would I say good-bye for her. She will write to Karen, she says.'

'No good scolding the poor child,' said Mrs Forrest, worriedly. 'I can't imagine what's happened to her.'

‘Not a question of scolding,’ said Aunt Anne in her bland voice. ‘I like Miss Mersey-White as a woman, though not as a musician.’

‘Don’t you think Karen has gone home?’ suggested Judy, coming back from her tour of inquiry.

‘More than likely,’ said Aunt Anne. ‘Miss Mersey-White drove Biddy back, so she will be there to welcome her.’

‘Oh, how kind,’ said Mrs Forrest; and they all made up their minds that if they went home they would find Karen waiting for them.

They walked home discussing her musical future. She must have proper lessons. That much was clear. Somehow it had to be afforded, Ralph said in his most decided way. It had been jolly decent of Rosalba and all that, but she evidently was no earthly.

‘As a matter of fact I’ve got fifteen bob the kid can have,’ he finished up.

‘I haven’t got a bean now but I’ll give her a bit off my Christmas present from India. It’s fairly certain.’ Judy never had any money, but she wasn’t going to be outdone.

Meg thought she could manage seven and six, and Aunt Anne said she would help, though what good lessons cost she had no idea.

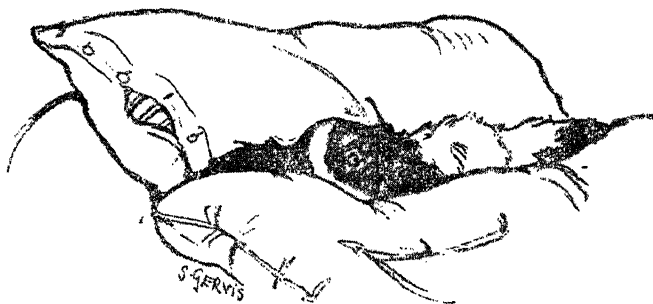
‘With every one helping like that we’ll do it,’ said Mrs Forrest.

‘Anyway, we’ll buck her up now,’ said Ralph. ‘As a matter of fact I thought she was jolly good, hammering away up there.’

‘So did I,’ agreed both sisters, and they all went up the steps to their home ready to give Karen the evening of her life.

But no Karen was there.

Biddy and Benjie opened the door. Both were horrified to find the party had come home without her. Benjie went straight off and consoled himself by drinking the soup that Biddy had warmed up and unwisely left on a low table he could reach; but Biddy was in a terrible state of mind.



'Not a sight or a smell of her, and she runnin' the roads this time of night. Wouldn't she be dreamin' the ould dirge with grey whiskers was after her—chasing her, begora.'

They all stood in the hall, frowning, arguing as to where Karen could have gone. Mrs Forrest told Biddy not to be foolish. Karen was far too sensible to have dreams. Then they discovered that Benjie had stolen the soup and also slept on Karen's bed, and that made a diversion. Then in the midst of that excitement came the note from Mr Bell.

Mrs Forrest's relief was great.

'With Mrs James—that must be the organist's mother.'

'I've heard of Derry James—a most natural person for her to go to,' said Aunt Anne. 'Another musician.'

'She's safe, anyway. Biddy, will you go and fetch her?'

'Deed and I will, and I'll take Benjie. I'll just be gettin' me hat on me head. There's a tin of strawberries.'

With that hint the family collected all the things Karen liked best for supper, tomato soup, the strawberries, and the chocolate biscuits she particularly fancied, and when she arrived they gave her a great welcome. Only when they were quite finished and it was nearly time for Aunt Anne to go did Mrs Forrest broach the subject of music. Better say what we have to say and send the child to bed happy, she said to herself.

'We've all made up our minds that we will afford you some proper lessons, Karen. We're very proud of you. The adjudicator said you were worth training——'

'He did,' put in Ralph. 'He laid it on jolly thick. I wish you'd heard him.'

'So that's fixed. Rosalba will understand, I had a talk to her in the hall. The only question is who to go to.'

'I know,' said Karen, calmly. 'It's all arranged. I've got three guineas and I'm going to Sonia Brand.' 'Sonia Brand!'

Only Aunt Anne understood the startling properties of the name. 'You don't mean Sonia Brand, the pianist?'

'Yes, I do. We fixed it up over the telephone.'

'Well, I'm blessed,' said Ralph.

'Of course I'm going to ask Rosalba if I may.'

At that moment Biddy brought in a note.

'The chauffeur's after bringing it. From Miss Mersey-White. Droppin' it in on his way to his bed.'

The note was for Karen.

'Shall I read it, darling?' Rosalba's handwriting was well known. Mrs Forrest took it and read it aloud.

DARLING KAREN,

I am going away unexpectedly as soon as I can get packed up. Do you think you could find someone else to help you with your piano? I'm not sure when I shall be back and you mustn't waste time. I'm sending you my little Broadwood as a present to-morrow morning and here is the thirty shillings I promised you if you won the competition. I thought you played beautifully and if I had been the judge I should have given it to you.

My love,

ROSALBA.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### SCALES ONLY

THE first lesson with Sonia was an event. Karen drove there packed tight between Derry and Jennifer with Benjie clasped in her arms to give her courage.

Sonia lived with her father in a tall, battered old house with a long strip of garden behind it that ended in stables. She had cleared out the two loose boxes, knocked down the wall that separated them from the coach-house and saddle-room, bought an old Persian rug and three sofas, and so turned the place into a music-room. Her piano stood where the horses used to champ their oats and she used their manger to stack her music.

Derry and Karen and Benjie went in, leaving Jennifer outside in the car.

'Well, Derry, d' you like it?' Sonia waved her hands to show she meant her room. 'It'll always smell of horses, but who minds? I love horses.'

Benjie loved horses too, and he went over every inch of the floor like a proper spaniel trying to get a clue as to where they could be. 'Stables? Stables?'—you could almost hear him saying it. Only when Karen went over to the piano did he give up his search and come to lie down in his usual way, his head on the pedal. Luckily Sonia took to him at once. When Karen had finished the Mendelssohn that Derry told her to play she said: 'U'm—yes. Benjie uses the pedal a little too much. We'll get him a basket,' and off she went to fetch him



a round dog-basket that suited him exactly. 'Basket,' she said, in a determined voice. He took one look at her and in he went instantly.

There was something very commanding about Sonia. She was not tall, and not particularly good-looking, though Karen decided at once that she had the most beautiful eyes she had ever seen. She was different from every one else, and that was all one could say.

When the Mendelssohn was done and Benjie safely in his basket she wasted no words. Just 'Yes. Quite nice,' and she got down to business at once. Karen must get her position right. That was the first thing to be done. No one could possibly play with hands held like that, or energy wasted on those unnecessary movements. She would take her for ten minutes every day till it was all corrected, and meanwhile she was not to touch the piano by herself.

'Not a note till I tell you. Promise?'

Karen nodded her head speechlessly. Not a note when she had been given a piano of her own only two days before! It was unbelievable.

But so was the lesson that followed. The ten minutes seemed like an hour. She was back to five-finger exercises. It was 'Go to bed, Tom' all over again, but this time it was serious, there was no Aunt Anne singing with her in a jolly cracked voice. She was put back to the beginning of things, and there she was to stay till she got her wrists right, her thumb over the notes, her elbows in, and everything else that Sonia wanted. She went back to the car with her heart in her boots. Derry and Jennifer assured her that she would do it in no time, but she knew better. It would have been a hundred times easier if she had never learnt at all.

'What do you think of her, anyway?' asked Jennifer.

'Sonia? Or what do I call her?'

Sonia seemed rather cheeky, yet Miss anything seemed quite wrong.

'Every one calls her Sonia so you had better. Didn't you think her wonderful?'

'Yes. I did,' said Karen, and tried to think why she thought so. She just was different from every one else and that was all about it. 'She's fearfully *alive*, isn't she?'

Derry laughed and said that was about it. You needed to be very specially alive if you wanted to play like Sonia.

Regular lessons began. Fortunately the tall old house was on a bus route, the same as Aunt Anne's, so she was allowed to go there alone with Benjie for company. Benjie cost a penny each way, and as they both went every day she was very thankful for Rosalba's thirty shillings. As soon as the days grew longer she was to be allowed to walk, which would be very much cheaper. Every day she opened her piano, her precious little Broadwood, dusted it and shut it up again. It was put, for the moment anyway, on the landing upstairs. Rosalba had sent a music-stool with it, the one she had always used with a specially thick cushion to make it the right height. The Christmas holidays came and went and still she might not play, though the ten-minute lessons became rather longer and she started on a scale—not a casual scale such as Aunt Anne had made her play for ten minutes before her pieces, but a scale where every movement counted, where you had to be *right*, a word Sonia snapped out sharp as a pistol shot. However, it was interesting in its way; Sonia always made her understand what, exactly, she was doing. Also there were

some lovely moments when she was persuaded to sit down and play. Then it was like hearing Miriam Hals over again.

‘Yes, I’ll play to you,’ she would say, ‘but never, no, *never*, what you’re learning. I’m not going to have you imitating like a little parrot. You’ve got to *feel*, and feel for yourself, what’s more.’

Karen, sighing, longed to say that if only she could have something that wasn’t a scale or a finger exercise she would feel like anything. That, however, was not the kind of thing you said to Sonia.

By February her hands were more or less in the correct position and she was promoted to practising at home, ten minutes at a time, nothing but scales.

‘Well, that’s better. It’s a step, darling,’ said her mother, consolingly. ‘But practise when the others are out, won’t you. It’s rather disturbing, you know.’

So she practised in the afternoons as much as she could. Soon, however, the ten minutes became twenty and she was practising an hour a day—always scales. She played them in thirds and sixths, major and minor, in contrary motion, loud, soft, slow, quick—every variety she could, with arpeggios to match. By the time the summer term was well under way the hour had become an hour and a half; then the family began to rebel.

‘I say, Karen, all that trickling about for hours is simply frightful,’ said Ralph. ‘It puts me off my work. Why has it got to be those ghastly runs all the time?’

‘They’re scales. I’m not allowed to play anything else.’

‘Gosh! Let’s put the piano somewhere else then.’

‘But where?’ asked his mother. ‘There’s absolutely

no room in this tiny drawing-room, and you children must have the dining-room for your prep.'

'There's the bathroom,' suggested Judy, but Ralph said the steam wouldn't do it any good; what about the kitchen? Biddy was all over music; she liked it. It wouldn't put her off her work as long as Karen made herself scarce in the mornings before dinner; and anyway Biddy wasn't working for the school certificate.

So the piano went into the kitchen and Karen returned to the churchwarden's piano every morning, running her scales up and down to the admiration of Hemsey.

'Keeps you movin', don't she, this new lady,' she said. 'Puts me in mind of rabbits to 'ear you. I always was partial to rabbits.' And she started a new line of toffee with chocolate in it, she was so pleased to have Karen back.

In early June Sonia patted her on the back. She was pleased with her. She had learnt to work and that was something. Now she could get the Clementi studies and really start in earnest.

'Separate hands, mind, and not more than half an hour at a time. And take care those elbows don't stick out again when you think you're playing nicely. Now I'll play you that *Ballade* you like so much.'

Sonia spent that month in London, giving two recitals and playing at half a dozen concerts. She was back at the end of July to hear how the studies were getting on and to tell Karen she might learn a Beethoven sonata in the holidays.

'Carefully, though. Each hand separately, and your foot *under* the pedal, mind, till I see you again.'

'When will that be?' asked Karen. 'Wasn't she ever going to be allowed to play her lovely things again?'

Her Chopin? Her Schumann? Her face was so woe-begone when she asked that Sonia burst out laughing and patted her cheek.

'They'll wait for you, child. They'll be still there when you've the technique to play them. You've only had six months with me, you know, and so much unlearning to do. There's nothing to be gained by playing things before you're ready for them.' Then she relented. 'I tell you what, you can play as much Bach as you like, and two Beethoven sonatas, the first and second. There's a concession for you!'

Bach. How awful! Karen's jaw dropped still more. It was hardly a degree better than being kept to scales.

'Mayn't I play out of my head?'

'Extemporize? Can you?'

Sonia looked at her curiously.

'No, no. I didn't mean anything grand like that,' said Karen hastily, alarmed at the word. 'I mean tunes I know. Bits of things I pick out.'

'Yes, yes, of course do that.' Sonia seemed quite pleased at the idea. 'Do anything you can to train your ear. Get Derry James to help you.'

Derry lent her the Bach preludes and fugues to take away with her. She would be able to manage bits of them, he said, and was not in the least sympathetic when she said she would almost as soon play the scales and be done with it.

'Sonia is quite right, don't you make any mistake about it. Old John Sebastian, he'll train your head and your heart and your hands, and that's more than can be said for most of 'em.'

Then he showed her how he harmonized a scale, putting chords to each note and piling them up in a

great mountain of a climax and then down again. Karen thought it a glorious game.

‘But I ’ll never be able to do it, shall I?’

‘Why not? You ought to be learning some harmony, of course, and you ’re not. But try it. Listen to yourself and make up your mind what you want. You find it ’ll come.’

It did come, surprisingly. The holidays, in fact, were not so bad, musically speaking, after all. They went to Brent Hill for the third time, and by now they had plenty of friends and many picnics and parties. The Fergussons were away so Benjie remained one of the family, and that was a relief to Karen who had been afraid she might have to give him up. There was no running in to play to Rosalba this time, and practising had become a business-like affair when you had a certain thing to do and kept your eye on the clock, not just a matter of playing what you liked, how you liked. Karen spent two, sometimes three, hours at the piano, but she seemed to have plenty of time for everything else.

Judy went for a week to a camp with her Guide Company and came home full of ideas for supper picnics, when they made a fire and brought sausages to fry and then sang songs sitting in a circle. That singing, according to Judy, was a fearfully important part of the whole thing, and as she had no voice to speak of and no ear to pick up a tune, only a most accurate and retentive memory for words, it generally devolved on Karen. She had quite enough voice to start them off, and she never forgot a tune once she heard it. She found herself in request; her music was coming in useful at last.

‘You and I make a jolly good pair, I consider,’ said Judy complacently. ‘The sisters Forrest. I remember

the words and you remember the tune. I've half a mind to get you into our Company. It's time you began to join things.'

But there was no question of Karen joining anything. The autumn term found them all moved up; Judy and Ralph in their fifth forms, Meg in the Upper Fourth, and Karen, to her horror, in the bottom form of the senior school. That meant that now there was homework to do, and, worse still, she no longer got out of school at twelve o'clock. The precious three-quarters of an hour that she spent with Hemsey and her chocolate fudge was gone. For the first time in her life she found herself short of that precious thing—time.

'I don't want to join anything. I can't. I haven't got *time*,' she wailed, and Judy told her severely not to be silly. Of course in the Lower Fourth there was heaps of time. She'd better just wait till she was going in for the certificate, then she'd know what it was to be busy.

They couldn't see, any of them, that two hours and a half added on to the ordinary day when you have to go to bed at eight was fearful, simply fearful.

'You'd better get up early, darling,' said her mother. 'I've always understood that was what girls had to do when they wanted to practise.'

So she got up and practised from seven to eight every morning with Biddy lighting the fire and rattling the china and sizzling the bacon behind her.

Biddy, like Ralph, did not care for the scales.

'If it was a tune ye'd play,' she complained. 'Them slippery things up and down, up and down, they're cold as ice when ye've just jooked out o' bed.'

'I can't help it. I've got to play them till Sonia comes back.'

‘Will ye not give us a touch of *Lannigan’s Ball*, it’d put the heart into any one, that tune. Me and Micky Maguire we had a great dance over that one . . .’ And Biddy would begin on one of her stories. It was a good story, but that kind of thing didn’t make practising any easier.



Sonia was still away and Aunt Anne had shut up her house at Sharpset and gone to South Africa. There were no musical Saturday afternoons to look forward to and Karen would have been very dismal if it hadn’t been for Derry. ‘I’m not a pianist and I won’t give you lessons,’ he maintained, but he taught her to play her Bach so that she began to see, dimly, the beauties of it.



'You learn that,' he said, and gave her a French Suite, 'and don't you dare say it 's nothing but a finger exercise.'

Then he made her laugh by showing her how people used to play in Bach's day, keeping their hands flat and wagging their fingers up and down as if they were sticks fastened on with a hinge at the knuckles. Thumbs didn't count.

'If you 'd lived in those days no one would have cared two hoots how you held your hands,' he said, and Karen groaned out that she wished she had. Then there would have been no Sonia keeping her to finger exercises for months and months.

Bach, it seemed, made up his mind that a thumb could be as useful as a finger, and that the way to play was to keep your hand bent so that you could get at it. He wrote a lot of music that made people agree with him and the sooner Karen made up her mind to think him a musical hero the better. She took the music home, all covered as it was with Derry's fingering, and found to her surprise that the more she played it the more she liked it.

The festival came round again and she entered for the Scale Playing Class Under Fifteen without saying a word to a soul except Hemsey. This time there was no black velvet dress or visit to the hairdresser. She asked her mother if she might go out with Miss Hemans, and off they went together, she in her school clothes, Hemsey in the hat, ready to hold her coat for her when she went up to the platform.

She had to play any of the major or minor scales and arpeggios from memory and she got through without a mistake, the only candidate to do so. The adjudicator, a youngish man this time, congratulated her.

'We couldn't catch you out,' he said.

Karen looked at him grimly.

'If you 'd been playing practically nothing but scales for nearly a year you wouldn't be caught out either.'

'My goodness, I should hope not,' said the adjudicator. 'But even then I mightn't play them so well,' and he gave her full marks.



The family were very pleased with her when she showed them her certificate and her prize of a pound note. They liked the way she had gone off and done it with no fuss. 'That's the stuff,' said Ralph. Biddy was amazed. 'All that money for scuddin' up and down just!' But Meg, who was beginning to take her physical training very seriously, said it was worth it, every penny. She herself had a table of exercises pinned up on the wall beside her washstand and as soon as Karen

was dressed and gone to her piano she was up and doing them. Next term she hoped Miss Johns would let her try handstands, that somersault on your hands over the horse that some of the Fifth did. She was thirteen and as big as most of the Fifth and quite as strong. She knew the value of things like scales; she did them herself in her own line.

Derry was pleased too, though for quite different reasons.

‘Sonia’s coming back from America next week. This will show her you mean business.’

## CHAPTER XIX

### JUDY APPROVES AT LAST

SONIA meant business too. She came back from America more alive, as Karen called it, than ever. So much time had been missed, she said, that she would give two lessons a week, engagements permitting, right through the Christmas and Easter holidays till May. Karen must work hard and have something to show for the winter.

The year at technique had made an enormous difference. Karen could feel it herself. She could stretch an octave comfortably now. Scale passages when she met them in her pieces ran off her fingers like water. She learnt what Sonia called the '*Little Pathétique*' sonata of Beethoven so quickly and easily that she was promoted to the real *Pathétique*. She took it home and found to her joy that she could thunder out the massive chords of the introduction and rush down the chromatic scale that led to the allegro in grand style. It was gorgeous. She felt like Miriam Hals. She couldn't resist playing it in the early morning when she ought to have been doing her hour of technique.

'Listen to my new piece, Biddy,' and she explained it was called pathetic.

'Would it be someone cryin' on ye?' Biddy inquired, and Karen played it again.

'Someone roarin' and howlin'?' Biddy was doing her best to follow the idea.

'No. Not exactly. I think it's more that it makes you want to cry. Does it?'

'It does not,' said Biddy, 'and I'd sooner have me "Drink" any day.' Then she added consolingly: 'But ye're a great wee girl at it, I'll say that.'

She returned to her frying-pan and Karen continued.

Karen's version of the sonata did not, however, make Sonia want to cry either. On the contrary her eyes took an ominous glint when Karen, proudly playing it through, looked up for approval.

'Now you take care, Karen,' she said. 'None of your cheap tears. You're not playing *Baby, I'm blue for you*, or anything like that. Don't go waving yourself about. Sit still, and for goodness' sake play it in time.' Then she told her that Beethoven was facing the fact that he was going deaf when he wrote it, and the last thing he wanted was sloppy sentiment. She must play the chords in exact time if they were to be strong, dignified, courageous, as he intended them to be. For once she swept Karen off the music stool and played it herself. 'And now, don't touch that introduction again till you can play the allegro. And that,' she finished up meaningly, 'will not be for a very long time.'

That, Karen found, was only too true. The open octaves for the left hand nearly killed her, she said. She practised and groaned, groaned and practised till Biddy had to sympathize.

'Hasn't yer hand the right to be tired,' she said, when Karen complained that it felt as if it was coming off, 'wagging that way all the time. Is it pathetic they call it? 'Deed ye'd be lamentin' and cryin' more'n would wash yerself to learn it.'

Sonia's lessons were never dull. One moment you

soared to the skies with joy, hearing 'I like the way you play that,' and the next you'd cry more 'n would wash yourself, as Biddy said. You never knew which it was going to be. But it was gloriously exciting, and Karen felt the sun had gone out of the skies when June came and the lessons had to stop. Sonia was off again. London for a month or so with two recitals and some concerts, after that another American tour. Karen was to practise steadily and get on with everything. Perhaps Derry would help her and she herself would be back in October or November.

'Perhaps it's a good thing, darling,' said her mother. 'Now you can attend to your ordinary work.'

The ordinary work, school lessons, was going badly. Ralph did her Latin exercises for her and Judy her sums, and she had got through her homework pretty well. Exams., however, were coming, and there would be no Judy and Ralph behind her then. She had a dreadful feeling she was going to be found out.

Sure enough she was. The results of the form exams. were read out in the school hall two days before the end of term and every one crowded in to hear how they had done. Both Meg and Judy had paper and pencil all ready to note the marks of their particular friends besides their own. Karen knew it was a dead certainty that they would put hers down—then the fat would be in the fire.

She was right. The fat was in the fire. Dinner was made painful by the row of R's, standing for rejection, that came in the column opposite Karen's name. She had done atrociously, worse than any one in the school. Judy said it was a disgrace to the family. Even Ralph, who generally stuck up for her, said it was pretty putrid. He did not say, however, as he once would have, that she

had better let the music go and get on with the real work. Winning the scale competition had done that much for her.

Her mother looked perplexed and worried.

'I'm sure I don't know what to say, darling. We can't have you growing up an ignoramus even if you do play the piano. These marks are really fearful, aren't they?'

'Mine are none too good,' said Meg, honestly. 'I haven't got a first for anything and two rejections.'

'I suppose you must be stupid, that's all,' said Judy, superior with her row of firsts.

'Well, then, I am,' Meg retorted stoutly. 'That's that, and don't let's worry.'

'It's all very fine, but you've got to get the school certificate before they'll take you in at a decent training college, if that's what you're after,' said Judy, and flattened her out completely. What an awful idea! Was it really true? Meg could hardly believe it. She borrowed Judy's bicycle to fly back to school to ask Miss Johns, and came back more gloomy than they had ever seen her. It was true. Miss Johns had passed the ghastly thing herself not so very long ago. Meg, utterly downcast, said exams. were for people like Judy who liked them. She had never intended to touch them.

'Sickening, I call it. But you needn't do them, Karen. You needn't do ordinary exams. I asked Miss Johns and she says she doesn't think they matter for piano people.'

Karen's spirits soared again. It wasn't so fearful of her to have done so badly after all. Perhaps it would have the good effect of making them leave her in the lower fourth while all the rest of the form moved up.

Then she would have another peaceful year going over the same work a second time with people younger than herself.

That, however, was not to happen.

The last day of term was pouring wet and very cold for nearly August. They had half an hour's break in the middle of the morning, between the end-of-term affairs that occupied them, and someone suggested dancing. Was there any one who could play? Who was there? Judy was heard to say that she thought her young sister could, and Karen, for want of any one better, found herself hoisted up on the platform where the grand piano stood. She had been on two or three platforms by now, but never that one. But can she play, that kid out of the lower fourth? The school looked at the youngest Forrest curiously. Not at all like Judy, with that great bumpy forehead and eyes that seemed to be looking for something; and not at all like Meg, who had actually played substitute in the tennis six three times and kept her head and done jolly well. Could she play, this kid?

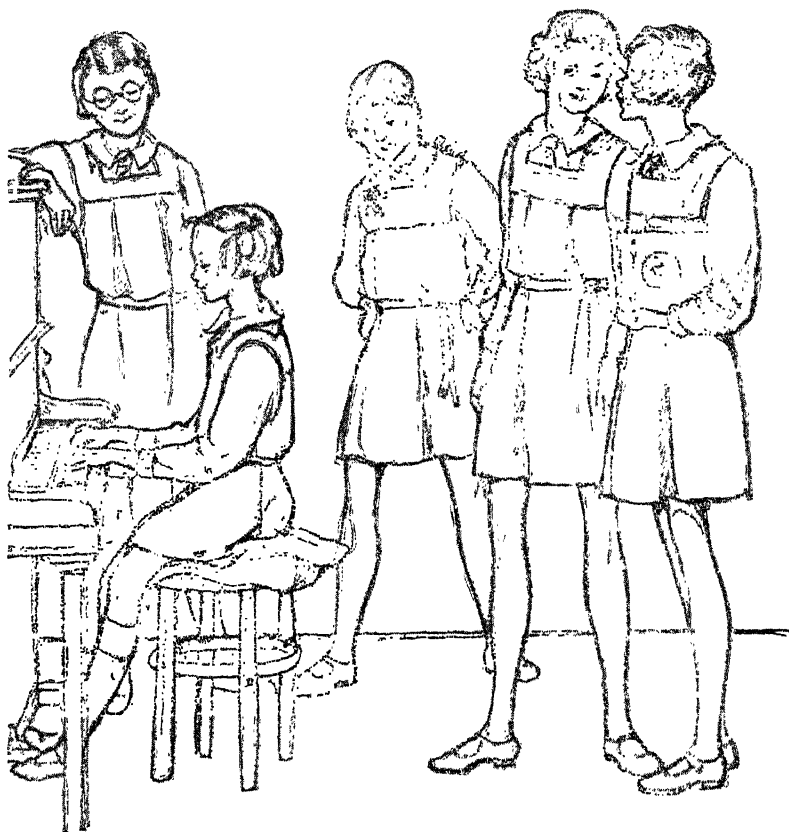
She could and did. They danced and clapped and said that was something like and would she give them a two-step. There was 'go' about her. Like Mr Fergusson they found she played so that you really could dance.

'Now play us something properly,' shouted a girl who was a music-lover herself.

'Go on, but for goodness' sake don't give them any of your high-brow stuff,' hissed Judy in her ear. Karen was coming off splendidly; she mustn't be allowed to spoil it.

So Karen gave them the 'Rocket'—nothing high-brow about that. A scream with the back of her hand scraping up the keyboard—that was the rocket going off. Seven





singing notes for the stars. Thunder in the bass with a loud pedal down for the applause. It was a great success and she tried something more.

‘Listen. This is a dancing bear.’ She played the passage where he lumbers in, out of the Haydn symphony that Aunt Anne always called ‘The Bear.’

They laughed at that. ‘Jolly good,’ said the head girl, and Karen’s spirits began to bubble.

‘This is Judy on her bicycle. Falling off.’ She swooped about the piano amid roars of applause.



R. S. Sewing

‘Now do Norah.’

‘I’m like Schumann taking off his friends in the *Carnaval*,’ thought Karen, and did Norah, who kept goal for the school, in a whirl of arpeggios down in the bass, the scrum round her goal. ‘Here she is, saving one——’ and the ball flew out up the piano in a screeching run and off over the edge.

That went well too, and, now quite above herself with excitement, she called out: ‘Listen. Who’s this?’

She played a quiet little marching tune with a peculiar jerk in it, growing gradually louder and louder.

Their head mistress had a characteristic walk. To hear her come down the corridor, her heels tap-tapping on the wooden floor, her particular turn down the five steps that brought her down to the hall, was to recognize her instantly. Her walk down that resounding passage was known as ‘Bunny’s tap-dance’—Bunny was the affectionate if disrespectful nickname they gave their Head.

Karen caught the rhythm exactly, and, with a slight turn of her head and shoulders, conveyed just the bustling rather rolling walk. The whole school recognized it and burst into roars of laughter.

Bunny, as it happened, was in the gallery of the hall out of sight of the crowd, talking to Karen's form-mistress.

'Who is this child amusing them all so much?' she inquired.

'Karen Forrest.'

'Oh, yes, of course—the youngest of the three. That's the one you suggest leaving down in the lower fourth for another year. Are you sure she's so stupid? She doesn't look it.'

'She isn't stupid, but she has learnt nothing. Her exams. were terrible.'

'She's learnt to use her hands on the piano, at all events,' said Bunny, who was musical herself and played the 'cello in her spare moments.

The form-mistress agreed about that. Karen apparently worked at music but at nothing else.

'H'm—I see,' said Bunny thoughtfully. Karen by then was playing a Chopin waltz that showed off her powers of scale-playing—she had found that people listened to you best if you played something fast. 'I think we'll move her up. Give me her papers to look at, will you. I'll have a talk with her. Would you send her up to me, please.'

Karen, eating chocolate biscuits in the Head's room, still treading on air after her triumphs below, talked fervently about music; what she liked best, what she couldn't play at all, what Derry said, what Aunt Anne said, what Sonia said. No one had ever let her talk so much about music before. It was a nice long time before the question of her examination results came up; then, in the middle of a discussion about why you waggled your hand on the finger-board of a cello, if Bunny didn't open a drawer and take out the ghastly blotted papers that she hoped she had done with for ever.

It was then Bunny's turn to talk.

'You won't find, you know, that the musicians were at all backward and lazy over ordinary work. Your Bach, that you say you 're getting to like so much, went to a high school just as you do, and he learnt the Latin you seem so hopeless about. Haydn was at a choir school. Mendelssohn had a very good education, quite as much of it as most well-off boys. I can assure you you 'll be all the better player if you are properly educated. This sort of thing'—Bunny waved her hand contemptuously towards the papers—'this sort of thing won't do at all, you know.'

Karen collapsed like a pricked balloon. Then she collected herself sufficiently to explain about the homework done for her by Ralph and Judy and how it didn't seem to help when it came to exams. Also she explained about the three hours' practice.

'Sonia—it's Sonia Brand who teaches me'—she couldn't resist that proud aside—'Sonia says I 'll be thirteen next term and then I must do three hours—regularly, not just sometimes. She did three hours. Every one does three hours.'

The interview was satisfactory in the end. Karen was to be moved up and she was to do her homework honestly by herself in the future; on the other hand, she was to drop Latin next term and perhaps algebra and have the time in the morning to practise on one of the school pianos.

The bargain struck they said good-bye.

'Well, good-bye, Karen, and enjoy your holidays. Remember you get four months of them and that 's far more than your Bach and Haydn and the rest of them ever dreamt of. Four months and as much music as you like in them.'

## CHAPTER XX

### A WEEK AS PIERRETTE

BUT there Bunny was wrong. Karen couldn't get as much music as she liked in the holidays; on the contrary, this time she couldn't get any at all.

Alas! there was to be no Brent Hill this summer; no pleasant chintz drawing-room with the piano in the corner and only Benjie to interrupt. The rector had been ill and this year he wanted his rectory himself.

'But I haven't forgotten the needs of the Forrest family,' he wrote. 'I've borrowed another house for you all, one that I believe you will like even better than this. It is at Sandspit, so you will get your change, and sea air into the bargain.'

'Now isn't he kind!' cried Mrs Forrest delightedly, when she had read it aloud. 'We are lucky—we really are. The house is close to the sea and you'll be able to bathe all day—so good for you.'

So they went to Sandspit.

It was a straight up-and-down house in a terrace, belonging to two old ladies who had gone to Scotland. There was a basement kitchen where Biddy cooked, or rather where she cut their sandwiches, for they seemed always to be out; a ground floor with a dining-room and a study that was always locked; another floor with a drawing-room which though it wasn't locked was the kind, Judy said, you never used; it was full of furniture and treasures, knick-knacks on little tables, cabinets of

little silver ornaments, small chairs, small tables. 'Such a fuss,' said Meg, and after one look returned to the dining-room.

'We 'll get dust-sheets and cover everything up,' said Mrs Forrest. 'Then we 'll lock it up till we go.'

'But isn't the piano here?' inquired Karen. Surely it wasn't going to be a house without a piano.

No, no piano. There wasn't one. The old ladies were not at all musical. The key was turned on the drawing-room without regret.

'You've all got bedrooms to yourselves,' said Mrs Forrest. 'We 'll manage perfectly with the dining-room and the kitchen. You 'll always be out.'

They were. Ralph played cricket; Judy, when she wasn't paying visits to school-friends, bathed and sun-bathed and seemed for ever going to picnics; Meg joined a tennis club and found herself in an American tournament that promised to go on for weeks.

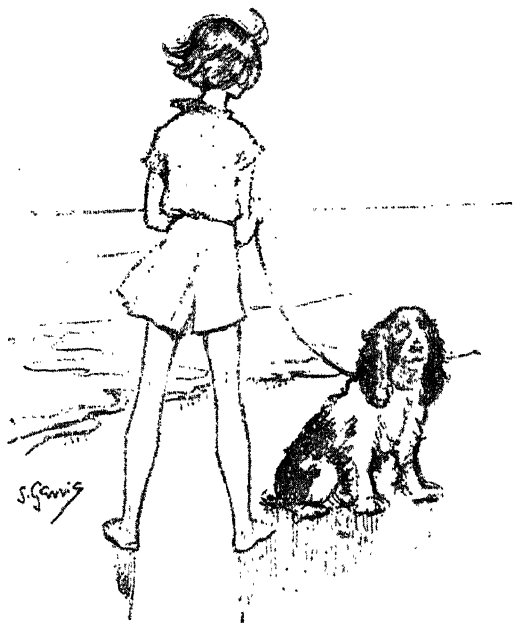
'Of course, do what you like, all of you,' said their mother. 'The only thing I don't feel keen about is that bit of the sands near the pier and the station. I'd rather you didn't go there. The sea never seems to come up and wash them clean, and there are such masses of people everywhere with all the coco-nut shies and minstrels and things. I think, please keep away from that end.'

The twins and Meg at once said that of course they would. The sands down there were covered with paper bags and orange peel, and anyway the bathing was rotten.

Karen, however, said nothing at all.

She and Benjie, with nothing very particular to do when bathing was over, had already strolled down the beach to the end their mother did not like; the unfashionable end where you could see white cotton-wool

clouds of smoke from the trains that brought load after load of people to join the crowds on the sands. Karen had put Benjie on a lead because there were so many other dogs about. Benjie wasn't particularly brave, she knew, and he was better kept out of fights. They had strolled down together, keeping to the edge of the



sea and looking in a lazy way for the white fairy shells that came in on the tide, fragile and transparent as the petals of a wood anemone.

Then, just as Rosalba's intermezzo had drawn her out of the wood into the laurels that day at Brent Hill, so was she drawn into the region of the deck-chairs and paper bags and orange peel—again by the sound of a piano.

It was a little tinkly sound coming from a booth, not an ordinary booth like the coco-nut shies and shooting ranges, but an affair like a miniature theatre. It had a red-and-white striped awning as roof and sides, and a blue-and-white striped curtain as its fourth wall. Karen pushed aside a fold of the curtain and peeped in. Inside, shut away from the world outside, a girl about the age of Judy was playing on a cottage piano. She had a beret perched on yellow curls, the yellowest curls Karen had ever seen, and wonderful scarlet lips in a round, red, moon-like face. It was a pleasant face, though at the moment it was crumpled into a furious frown at the sheet of music on the stand. She was playing a song out of a revue running in London; Karen knew it because Ralph liked it and had made her play it to him. This girl was taking it much too slowly with showers of wrong notes; now and again she came to a dead stop.

She looked up and saw Karen staring at her.

'Hallo, kid,' she said with a grin, as if she were glad of an excuse to take her hands off the piano. 'What are you doing, listening to me free of charge?'

'I know that thing,' said Karen.

'Do you? Well, it's more than I do—and I've got to have it right by three.'

'By three? Why?'

'It's dad's new number. He wants to try it at the three o'clock, and if it gets on well he'll do it again at the six and nine. Cripes!'

The girl gave a sort of combined groan and grin. She had a jolly, good-tempered grin, rather like Meg's, and Karen took to her. Her hands were large and red and she held them over the notes in a way that would have made Sonia shudder.



'Do you play his accompaniments then?'

She nodded.

'I have to. Mum's got such rheumatism she can't touch 'em. Oh, my!'

She groaned and started prodding the piano again.

Karen could not bear it.

'I say, shall I show you how it goes?'

'You can't, can you?'

In a moment Karen and Benjie slipped through the curtain and up on to the platform. It was like a stuffy little room with its blue-and-red striped walls.

'Right-o,' said the girl, 'you can't be worse than me, any old how.'

It was a week since Karen had touched a piano and she played like a starving man sitting down to a square meal.

The girl was amazed at her.

'That's it. That's the way. I say, you can't half play,' and she danced heavily round the platform. 'You give it ever such a swing. Do it again till I get the idea.'

They were hard at it when the curtains parted and in came a man, a short, stoutish man with a round head and a jolly face.

'Hallo,' he said. 'That's never Ivy.' Then he looked at Karen with a twinkle in his eye. 'No, it isn't. I listened outside and I said to myself: "Ivy's caught a fairy, that's what she's done."'

'I'll never do it, dad. Not that number, I shan't,' said the girl.

'Oh, Ivy, Ivy, Ivy!'

So Ivy was the girl's name and the stout man was her father. He looked at his daughter with such a comic expression as he said her name that Karen couldn't help laughing.

'No good your saying "Ivy" to me. You try it with her,' she pointed at Karen. 'You'll see what I mean.'

So Karen and the fat man performed together. It was a jolly, rolling song and he sang it in a jolly, rolling voice with a bit of a dance between each verse and quite a long one at the end. His fat body was as light as a feather, the platform hardly shook.

'Say, it's a good number, that song,' he panted when he had done. 'Wish you'd play it for me, miss, whoever you are. You get the swing.'

'That's right,' cried Ivy, enthusiastically. 'That's what I said. Ever such a good swing she gets.' She turned to Karen. 'Couldn't you? Couldn't you play for dad instead of me?'

'I . . . Oh . . . When?'

Hardly knowing what she was saying Karen found herself promising she would. She'd love to, she said, and it was true. She had never done anything like this accompanying before, and she found it thrilling to be playing with someone, sharing the music with him, as you shared a rally with a tennis partner.

'I'd be most happy,' said Dad. 'Can you tog her up though, Ivy?'

Ivy said she could, easy. That was the best of a pierrot dress, it'd fit any one.

'That's great, then,' said Dad, quite casually, as if it was the most natural thing in the world to have Karen to accompany him. 'We'll just give it another run through, shall we?'

They had half an hour's practice and Karen found to her surprise that Dad worked, and expected her to work, quite as hard and seriously as Sonia. The song had to be timed to a nicety. There were certain important

pauses: 'That'll get a laugh, that joke, you've got to wait for it, see? I do a bit of talking there, can you fill in with a chord or two—quiet, so that they can get me?'

Yes, Karen thought she could manage a chord or two.

'Well, then, stick to them till you hear me say that,' he pointed to the line '*And so the world wags on.*' 'That's the cue. When I say that it means I'm getting back to the verse. See? Now we'll have another run through.'

Karen finished at a quarter to one and ran home to lunch. On the way she had time to think. Would her mother allow this accompanying? She felt pretty sure she would not, but she pushed that knowledge into the back of her mind and said to herself it would be better to say nothing at all about Ivy or dad or anything else. Her mother had said they could all do what they liked—well, then, this was what she liked. She was doing what she was allowed. She would have a quick lunch—the others were all out—and say she was going back to the sands.

Ivy was waiting for her with a short white frock like a sort of coat with very full skirts. It had black pom-poms for buttons and the little white felt hat had black pompoms adorning its high crown. The shoes were far too big so she had to do without, and her beach sandals and bare legs, brown with the sun, looked wrong.

'Can't be helped,' said Ivy. 'The top half of you is ever so nice and you look such a kid that the legs don't matter. Dad'll probably call you "Baby" or "Girlie"—what's your name?'

Karen's tongue, for some reason, refused to give her name.

'K . . . K . . .' she stammered.

'Kay? That 'll do. Baby Kay, Girlie Kay—they're both ever so nice. Dad 'll take whichever he likes.'

She put a dab of rouge on Karen's cheeks and rubbed a black liner over her eyebrows, and there she was—ready.

There was quite a big audience. The day was hot, a train had just come in and most of the visitors felt it was a moment to sit still and watch other people work. The women sat in their deck-chairs, knitting; the men had a newspaper which could be read or put over the face for a quiet snooze if it became boring; the children listened or strolled off to dig, as they felt inclined. They were generally half asleep at the three o'clock, Ivy told Karen: 'But you should see them at nine when dad gets out his flood light. My!'

The new number went well. There was quite a lot of clapping and the funny man with the baggy trousers came up to ask who the new girl at the piano was. Ivy said shortly it was a friend come to give dad a hand with his new number.

'Don't you like him, the funny man?' asked Karen. Ivy's voice had been short and sharp for once.

'No, I don't,' answered Ivy, 'and dad doesn't either.' She told Karen that theirs had been a family concert party: father, mother, two girls, a boy, and herself, much younger. 'I wasn't ever any good, but I was Baby Ivy and I did a dance all right.'

They worked at Sandspit and places around till the middle of August and then they went up north to resorts like Blackpool. 'My two sisters have gone into a shop now, getting good money they are. Regular young ladies, ever so thin. Not a bit like me. And Bob—that's my brother—has got into a garage. He doesn't

think of nothing but motor-cars now. Mum's hands are bad, so there's only dad and me left, and I'm not much good. We have to take on people like that comic, and dad says they take all the profit.' They had another week to do and then they were off up north.

Karen liked Ivy and she liked Dad, who put a shilling into her hand after the six o'clock, and said he would make it sixpence a performance, and a bob if she'd come to the nine o'clock. There was a tap-dance no one could play. He'd like to tack it on to the first song if she could manage it. 'You got to keep it soft, girly, so's they hear me, and you got to make it *clear*, and you got to keep it *hot*. Ivy can't look at it.'

Karen managed the tap-dance. They rehearsed it behind the striped curtain with the sun beating down on the awning, making the place hot as an oven. Dad mopped his face and complimented her on sticking to it. She knew how to work, he said, and that was a lot. He showed her how to curtsy and smile to the audience when she came in, and she was suddenly reminded of Rosalba. 'They've paid for their seats, haven't they? You got to look happy or you won't make 'em happy. You got to make 'em glad they've come. Another run through, shall we?'

They worked again and he was pleased with her. When the audience clapped the new turn that evening he took her hand and made her bow with him. They cheered the pianist and he whispered: 'Play 'em the music, girly, I'm through,' and cried: 'Girly Kay 'll play you the number herself, and she says if any lady or gentleman will join in the singing she 'll be only too pleased.'

It was almost as successful as the musical sketches at school. Karen sang, and when she smiled and nodded

at them they all sang with her. She ran home, delighted with herself. Only a week, she thought, and told herself that of course her mother wouldn't mind. Anyhow, she would never know. It was a particularly occupied week for the family; she easily slipped away with Benjie for the three o'clock and after tea for the six o'clock. The nine o'clock she never attempted. Her mother was adamant about early beds.

No one had any suspicion of what she was doing. Ivy took off the rouge and eyebrow stuff with grease; she was in her own dress and safely home ready for tea by five o'clock every day. Only Benjie grew rather peevish and fat, for he did nothing but sit outside the booth tied to a post waiting for her to come back.

Saturday came, the concert party's last day. Before they took the curtain up for the six o'clock Dad put five shillings into Karen's hand in addition to the shilling she had earned.

'That's for being a good girlie,' he said. 'And I don't mind saying I'd like to take you along up north in the party. You've got a feeling for an audience, you have.'

Karen felt sad to think she was wearing the pierrot dress for the last time, but thankful, all the same, that the time had come to an end and she hadn't been found out. She had earned quite a lot of money besides enjoying herself, and—*she hadn't been found out.*

But she was counting her chickens before they were hatched.

On that Saturday Ralph had a cricket match. It was a two days' match between unequal teams. His side batted on the Friday and got out four of the other eleven before they drew stumps. On the Saturday the rest of

the wickets fell, there was a follow-on, and Ralph's side won by an innings with everything over by five o'clock. He caught an earlier train than he intended and was back at Sandspit, very pleased with himself (he had kept wicket and made twenty-eight runs), by six o'clock. Supper was not till eight, it was a fine evening, and he decided to go down to the sands near the pier and station and see what every one was doing. He might get 'a coco-nut to bring back to the family. So, cricket bag in hand, he strolled about among the Saturday-night crowds. He got his coco-nut all right, and he won a frightful yellow vase at the shooting range. The orange peel and the paper bags were pretty thick, there seemed to be thousands of people, and it smelt as stuffy as a waiting-room. Phew! His mother was quite right, he decided, to tell them to keep to the other end; only a very high winter tide would get the place cleaned up again.

The biggest crowd seemed to be round a little sort of booth, all red-and-white stripes. What were they doing there, he wondered? He strolled over to see. It's popular, anyway, he said to himself; the nearest he could get was standing room behind the last row of chairs. A man in baggy trousers and a little straw hat was doing a funny song about mothers-in-law and lodgers—the usual sort of thing. He wasn't bad and Ralph gave him a laugh. Then a fattish girl, about his own age, in pierrot dress, came up and shook a bag at him. She had rather a nice grin and he liked the honest way she said: 'Well, you 're listening, aren't you, even if you haven't got a chair?' Rather a sporting sort of girl, Ralph thought, in spite of all the make-up. By the time he could attend again a fattish man was singing. He sang jolly well, thought Ralph; he must bring Karen down to

hear him one evening. The kid was being very sensible about doing without the music she was so mad about. She deserved a bit of a reward.

'Is he doing the tap-dance?' asked a man in a panama hat.

Ralph said he didn't know.

'You can tell by seeing if he's got Girlie at the piano. No one else can't play it. I know that for a fact.'

'Girlie?' asked Ralph.

'Yes, she's there,' put in another with better sight.

'Girlie Kay. Don't you know her? Been with the party a week. A wonder kid, that's what they call her.'

'Don't know about that—she's probably about thirty—but she's got swing, anyway.'

Ralph listened to this and looked casually at Girlie Kay. There wasn't much of her to be seen behind the piano till she got up and held the stout man's hand to bow.

'Girlie'll give it now,' said he, and the audience laughed and clapped as if they were all old friends at a party.

'That Girlie isn't half a draw,' said the panama hat.

'Yes,' said the other; 'something about her.'

Girlie Kay, if that really was her dreadful name, seemed to be an ordinary pierrot as far as the top half went. As far as Ralph could see she was got up like the girl who had collected his money—pink cheeks, white hat, huge ruffle, black pompoms everywhere; but she had brown sunburnt legs and sandals like any one else, like Karen. . . . Ralph's eyes were suddenly fixed in horrible fascination. Like Karen? It *was* Karen. It was Karen up there flying about the piano, nodding and grinning like a hyena, with all the audience singing and





whistling and the stout man doing a silly little dance and clapping his hands. It was Karen holding his hand and making that foul little curtsey that Rosalba had taught her, only worse, miles more vulgar. It was Karen with black eyebrows like slugs and red cheeks like a doll's. *Karen!* Good heavens!

In a blind fury Ralph seized his bag and stalked round to the back of the booth. There he found proof positive in the shape of Benjie, bored to distraction, leaping at the end of his lead at the sight of someone he knew.

He waited grimly. He was there when Karen emerged in her ordinary clothes, her face clean and shining with pleasure and excitement, Dad's six shillings in her hand, Dad's and Ivy's good-byes and thank-yous ringing in her ears. She came running out to release and comfort poor



Benjie and there he was, holding one end of the leash—Ralph, with an expression on his face she had never seen before, a quite terrible expression that turned her heart to water.

‘Ralph . . .’ she whispered.

‘Yes, Ralph,’ and with awful, shrivelling scorn he added. ‘It’s Ralph to take you home, *Girlie Kay!*’

## CHAPTER XXI

### A LITTLE REAL PRACTICE

'Oh, stop snivelling for goodness' sake,' he said at last. 'Dry up, and we'll go home to supper.'

'I c—can't,' sobbed Karen.

Nothing, nothing on earth would make her face her mother and Judy and Biddy. Meg wouldn't be so bad; perhaps she wouldn't say anything.

'Look here,' said Ralph, looking at her straightly, 'if you promise me on your honour, absolutely on your honour, not to go and do anything like that on the sly, in that sickening way, again, I'll promise not to split on you. I won't tell a soul.'

'Oh . . . Ralph . . .'

It was like having a life-line thrown to you when you were drowning.

'So now stop it. You can't go in with your eyes all bunged up like that. You've blubbed for half an hour.'

Half an hour! It seemed like weeks and weeks since she had come out and found Ralph with a look on his face to make your blood run cold.

'Look here, I tell you what, let's have a bathe. Do you good and I'll give you a diving lesson. That'll account for the eyes.'

That evening at supper her mother was quite worried to see her look so tired.

'These long walks with Benjie are too much for you, darling. You really mustn't be out all day with him like this. Why, even your voice sounds tired to death.'

Ralph came to her rescue with: 'My fault, we had a terrific diving effort. She only wants to sleep it off.'

So next morning when her mother and the twins went to church at eight o'clock Karen was left to sleep, and when she woke up at half-past nine Biddy brought her her breakfast for a treat. She ate it and thought of Dad and Ivy and the rest of them travelling up and up England to Scarborough. Ivy had a new pierrot dress for Scarborough—it didn't quite fit. They seemed like people in a dream.

The twins had their sixteenth birthday. September came and Ralph's examination results. He had gone in for the school certificate and passed with four credits—quite good for fifteen.

'Oh, I wish I'd gone in too,' wailed Judy.

'No necessity for you to hurry,' said Ralph, grandly. 'They were quite right to make you wait till next year. You can get more credits and get off matric. and all that. It's different for me. I want to get on to something else.' He took a deep breath, and announced calmly: 'I've decided to be a doctor.'

'A *what!*' cried his mother.

A doctor? Not a *doctor!* Ralph a person in a neat dark suit with nice hands and a black bag? They had been ill so little that they had hazy notions about doctors.

'But why a doctor?'

'It's a very expensive training,' said his mother. 'About the most long and expensive you can have.'

'Yes, I know, but I've had a rather good sort of letter from the godpa.,' and he produced it for his mother to read.

That was exactly like Ralph. He had made up his

mind long ago what he intended to do, but he didn't mean to mention it if he failed for his certificate, which he was taking rather young. His godfather said he would pay his fees for the first three years.

'Oh, well, that settles it,' said his mother.

'Yes, it does,' said Ralph.

They went back to school feeling a good deal older, all of them, with a brother who had chosen his profession and actually begun to work for it.

Ralph's biology and chemistry meant a great many new books, and even though he hunted some of them up in second-hand shops they cost a good deal. Their mother groaned.

'You 'll all have to be careful,' she said. 'What with Karen's music lessons and one thing and another there 's a fearful lot to do with our money.'

After that remark Karen dared to ask Ralph if he didn't think it rather a good thing that she had had that ten days with the concert party. Dad's money came in very usefully for bus fares and music. He grinned and said perhaps it was.

Music was difficult to get second-hand; people marked their fingering and messed up their copies, as she told Ralph. She wished she could earn some more. Sonia had given a recital when she was fourteen and made thirty-seven pounds.

It was Hemsey, of all people, who got her a job.

She went to the parish hall as often as she could to get the practice of playing on the churchwarden's grand piano, and Hemsey, in the same hat, with her usual lump of toffee, was always about, flicking a duster and lying in wait for her.

One day—in was in the Christmas holidays—she was

there with pursed-up lips, important news in her very walk.

‘Wantin’ any money, are yer, lovey?’

‘Same as usual,’ said Karen. She might have said more than usual, for that very day Sonia had told her she might get the Beethoven C minor concerto, and it had to be paid for.

‘Well, there’s a dancin’ class—funny sort of dancin’ I call it—in this ’all Saturdays, and they wants music for it. Playin’. Could yer do it?’

‘What? Get paid for it?’

‘Three and six an hour is what the madame says, and they goes on, different lots of ’em, for two hours sometimes. Throwin’ themselves about, arms and legs, what you might say, all over the place. Fat, too, some of ’em are.’

‘Music all the time?’

‘Two hours on end. . . . Phew! But that would be seven shillings.’

‘Oh, no, dearie. Only music when the madame claps ’er ’ands and gives ’em ’er special. Most of the time yer ’ll ’ave to watch ’em—and yer ’ll be earnin’ yer money then, I can tell yer.’

‘What sort of dancing is it?’

‘Now, there y’ ’ave me. Begins with a V. That’s all I know.’

Madame was fair-headed and middle-aged. She had been a Swedish drill mistress in her youth; then, keeping in tune with the times, she started what she called her health classes. ‘Vim, Vigour, and Vitality’ was her particular name for them. The three V’s. The people who were too fat came to get thin; the people who were too thin came to get fat; the thick-set to get willowy;

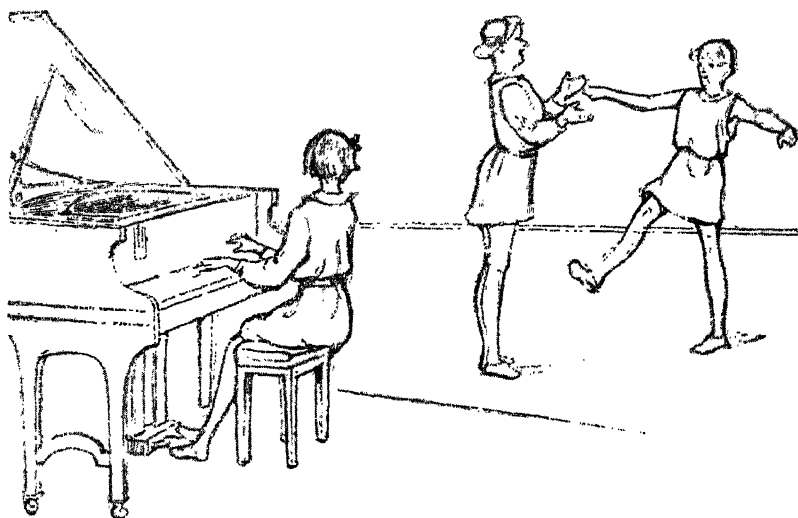
the too willowy to get something else. Her best exercises, she now felt, needed music, music that also had vim, vigour, and vitality.

‘But this is nothing but a schoolgirl,’ she said, when Hemsey produced Karen.

That was disappointing. The whole family had combined to rig her out so that she would look at least sixteen. Judy had lent her a dress that was far too long; Meg a hat, because hats were felt to be ageing and Karen seldom wore one. Ralph said gloves were important, and what about a veil? Whereupon his mother told him not to be ridiculous and if Karen could play like sixteen that was all that mattered.

‘Well, I suppose you can try,’ said madame. ‘They’re all for youth, that’s one thing; and I haven’t got any one else this afternoon, anyway.’

The harmonizing of a scale that Derry had taught her



came in usefully. She played her own chords for some of the exercises that had no music and no one seemed any the wiser. Dad's tap-dance helped too; she found she could watch them and play at the same time.

'You'll do,' said madame at the end of the afternoon, and handed her over the seven shillings. Karen went out and bought a pot of hyacinths for Hemsey and took the rest home.

'Well, darling,' said her mother, 'some of it for the lessons would be a very great help. I know Miss Brand takes you for far less than her usual fee, but a dozen seem to go nowhere.'

The Vim, Vigour, and Vitality classes lasted till Easter. After that the pupils got their three V's from the spring weather, presumably; anyway they stopped, but by then Karen had earned nearly five pounds. She told Sonia about it one windy March day when the lesson had gone well, and she approved. 'Good,' she said, 'we'll make





a musician of you yet. Very good practice, all that extemporizing.'

Extemporizing? Was that playing out of her head extemporizing? She couldn't ask just then because Sonia was full of her own affairs, worried to death over a concert. She had accepted an engagement over the telephone, to play the Grieg concerto with an orchestra in Bath in place of someone who had gone down with influenza. She had said yes, hastily, to the agent, hardly realizing it was only two days ahead.

'It's not a favourite concerto of mine at all and I haven't played it for ages,' she said, and sat down, frowning, to crash out the opening chords that Karen remembered so well. 'If only I had another piano in here I'd make you play the orchestral parts for me. You'd like that, wouldn't you?'

Karen's mind leapt to Rosalba with her Steinway in the bay-window and her Bechstein on the floor. How glorious it would be to hear Sonia in that room, and how still more glorious to play with her! Rosalba used to be mad on that concerto. She was at home, Karen knew, because Biddy had had a talk with the chauffeur who was still a friend of hers. She herself had never seen her since that awful festival which she still could hardly think of without a shudder. All the same, people didn't change—anyway the musical part of them didn't change.

'I say, I've got—I've had—I mean I've *got* a friend who has two pianos in one room. I've got Judy's bicycle. Shall I go and see if we could practise there?'

Sonia was surprised. She had never heard of the friend. However, two pianos in one room was exactly what she wanted so she told Karen to go by all means, and returned to her practising. No wasting of time for Sonia.

Rosalba was sitting in the big green chair by the fire; the logs were leaping with blue flames; the room smelt of hyacinths. It was all just the same. Now, thought Karen, her heart beating, will she say 'Go away'? Will she be pleased to see me, or will she not?

She was.

'Karen!' she cried, astonishment, but pleasure, unmistakable pleasure, in her voice. 'How *nice*! I've wondered so often how you were getting on. Half a dozen times I've nearly written to ask you to come and see me. Heavens! How you've grown! How old are you now?'

'Thirteen.'

'Well, well, *well*! Come along and sit on that stool and tell me all the news.'

She had forgotten the loathsome festival. Thank heaven for that! Karen plunged straight into Sonia and her concerto.

'But of course she shall come here. I would love it. I've heard Sonia Brand and you know how I adore that concerto. Let's go and fetch her. We'll get the car.'

Karen never forgot that afternoon.

Sonia and Rosalba took to each other from the very first minute. All Karen had to do was to say their names and then, feeling very pleased with herself, watch them make friends. Sonia tried both pianos and found them beautiful. She thought the room beautiful too. She, in fact, praised everything. After a few minutes, however, it was time for business.

'Now then, Karen, come along—if we really may practise, Miss Mersey-White? Which piano will you have?'

Karen blinked, and gulped, and said: 'Rosalba will play it with you. She used to play the concerto herself.'

Sonia looked at her in amazement. She knew there was nothing Karen wanted to do so much as to try that accompaniment on a second piano. She had said so dozens of times. However, there she was, nodding her head vehemently behind Rosalba's back, so there was nothing for it but to say: 'That would be very nice, then. Shall we begin,' and sit down to the piano.

They began. Rosalba was just the same as ever. She was nervous even in her own room with no audience except Karen. It was the audition all over again. Out came the handkerchief; the hands were wrung together; she kept on losing the place though she knew the concerto perfectly. 'I'm out of practice,' she murmured to Karen, who sat beside her, trying to help. 'And I strained a tendon of my hand last year.'

Sonia went on like a ship in full sail, riding over Rosalba's mistakes and hesitations in a serene yet resolute progress. More and more often, however, she stopped and repeated a passage of her own part five or six times, getting it exactly as she wanted, with a polite 'thank you' at the end. She's practising, thought Karen; Rosalba might as well not be there.

Tea was brought in and they got up. Karen sat and munched sandwiches and cakes—she had forgotten how good Rosalba's teas always were—and listened to them talking about music, composers, players, conductors. Rosalba, she said to herself, talks awfully well. There was no one she had not heard, no music she had not listened to.

Then the unbelievable happened.

'I'm sure you'd like to hear Karen, wouldn't you?' said Sonia.

'Yes, indeed I should,' said Rosalba.

'Shall we play her the first movement of that Beethoven concerto of yours, Karen?'

Rosalba's eyebrows went up.

'Beethoven concerto? That sounds very grand!'

'It's the little one in C minor.'

'But have you brought the music?'

'No, but I don't think that will worry Karen, and I think I can remember my part. You take the Steinway, Karen.'

She sat down and began the long opening that the orchestra plays before the piano enters.

Karen sat very still at the Steinway. This is how people must feel, she said to herself, up there on the platform, listening, singing to themselves, getting *into* the music, waiting for the moment to join in. It was a suffocating thrill to be waiting like this with Sonia playing the orchestral parts so beautifully. What must it be to be waiting and listening to a real orchestra . . . would she ever know?

Her moment came. Sonia gave her an encouraging smile across the piano, and with all the vigour she had she burst into the dramatic scales up the piano. . . .

It was done. Oh, it had been heavenly! Couldn't they play the slow movement? Wouldn't Rosalba ask for it? She was full of compliments. 'Karen's memory——'

Sonia, however, had no time to waste on compliments to Karen.

'Now, Miss Mersey-White, you have worked very hard. Take a cigarette and have a rest and I'll play the concerto right through with Karen. May I?'

So Rosalba had her rest and Karen was given the music.

'I don't expect you to play all the notes,' said Sonia.

'Orchestral parts arranged for piano are always very difficult and unsatisfactory. Take it easy and keep it going. Keep it going.'

Karen kept it going. She knew the sound of the concerto, having sat beside Rosalba so often while she played it. Aunt Anne's board had taught her to keep her eyes on the music, not her hands; her turns with Dad had taught her to keep her head and not to stop whatever happened. It was even more exciting than her own concerto to be part of Sonia's music like that. 'Oh, wasn't that simply *gorgeous*!' she cried at the end, and found herself shaking from head to foot.

Sonia clapped her hands. 'A very good shot at it.' That was enormous praise from Sonia. 'Now I'm going home for a couple of hours by myself, and I'm most grateful to you both.'

Rosalba cemented the friendship by driving her back, and Karen hopped on to Judy's bicycle and rode home on wings. It had been a dazzling afternoon. Sonia had played a phrase and she had answered it in the name of the orchestra, so to speak; she had held her own, given as good as she got. Oh, what would it be to play like that, to be a real pianist!

Sonia went off to her concert and came back with wonderful press notices.

'All owing to you and your Rosalba,' she said. 'That afternoon did it.'

Sonia had never shown Karen any press notices before. She read them through and through.

'What an awful feeling it must be, knowing people are listening just to criticize, just to pick holes, not to enjoy the music at all. Isn't it terrible to know they're there?'

'No,' said Sonia. 'For one thing the best of them

don't pick holes, they quite often cheer you on. And they have a way of getting you to correct yourself. I've had some bad notices in my time, I can tell you.'

'Well, I hope I never have to play in front of any of them.'

Sonia laughed.

'You certainly will unless I'm much mistaken.'

'Oh, no!' cried Karen in horror.

But she remembered that conversation when, almost exactly a year later, Biddy brought in the Bristol papers and there was her name: '*. . . Karen Forrest. This promising young pianist . . .*'

## CHAPTER XXII

### AUNT ANNE HAS AN IDEA

'YOUR Aunt Anne has come back,' announced Mrs Forrest, skimming through her letters at breakfast.

'Time, too,' said Ralph, the only one of the family to be down.

'I quite agree. She's much better in her own comfortable little house this sort of weather.'

It was November and through the windows it was grey with rain.

'Foul—but we shall play all right. The ground was pretty dry.'

Saturday, Mrs Forrest remembered; of course it was Saturday. There was a footer match against Cheltenham and Ralph was now captain of his side. Meg would probably be playing hockey. Judy was being taken to a matinée by a school friend and her brother. Karen and Benjie were going to tea with Rosalba to try over some duets. Very occupied they all were nowadays.

'Aunt Anne will find a difference in you. You've all grown.'

'Well, what d' you expect?' asked Ralph with a grin.

'She says will we all lunch on Sunday—that's tomorrow. Mrs Bent won't be there, but do we mind?'

'Course we don't. I'll make the old girl my omelet.'

'I'll tell her you're all rather good at that kind of thing since the holidays.'

They had returned to their dear Brent Hill vicarage

that summer, the vicar having now recovered sufficiently to take his usual trip to Scotland. They had, however, to look after themselves, because Biddy had taken a month's holiday and gone back to Ireland. She returned with a new hat, blue this time, which, she said, McGuire had given her out of the store. 'And, begor, didn't he say I was as fine a woman as any goin' the roads between here and Donegal.' She had come back pleased with herself, had Biddy, and Ralph, meanwhile, had learnt to make omelets.

'You get some mushrooms and I'll make the aunt a corker, shall I?' suggested Ralph, and got up to collect his books. 'Gosh, doesn't it seem ages since that first time we went over to see her and found her with the hose, d' you remember?'

'Yes—and that hat like a tray on her head.'

There was a scream from Karen when she heard that Aunt Anne was home again. It was an end of breakfast as far as she was concerned. How she had missed her! How often she had said to herself: 'I'll play that at Sharpset and see how Aunt Anne likes it,' and then remembered there was no Sharpset. Rosalba, Sonia, Derry, and Aunt Anne—the *listener* among them was Aunt Anne; and, after all, what was music





if you didn't sometimes just sit still and listen and love it.

And now she was home, actually home. They were all going to lunch on Sunday and she and Benjie were to stay to supper, if Benjie was still there.

'Of course Benjie's there and he's learnt to beg.'

She danced down the road and was nearly late for school. She would have been quite late, in fact, had it not been for Meg who caught her up (Meg had a bicycle too, now) and let her ride while she ran beside. 'Good thing for you I'm in training. I can keep up,' she panted, her long yellow plaits leaping, her satchel jogging against her back as she loped along, her hand on the seat of the bicycle. 'But,' she whispered severely as they slipped into the hall a second before Bunny's tap-dance sounded, 'you'll shut up the piano and begin to get ready at eight sharp to-morrow.'

Aunt Anne could hardly get over the changed appearance of the Forrest family. On Sundays they did not wear school clothes, and certainly, as Karen proudly decided, they did look nice and elderly. They went to church at Sharpset so as to be in good time to help with lunch, and the first person they saw when they came out was Mrs Bent. She had, as a matter of fact, broken her unbreakable law and left Bent's bit of beef in the oven while she popped along just to see how everything was. The cold chicken and ham and the apple-pie were all ready, she explained; it was only a question of finding the cream and putting the potatoes on and making the salad dressing, but she thought she'd just pop up and hear how they all were.

'Right,' said Ralph. 'We're popping too, so we'll all pop together, shall we?'

Mrs Bent eyed him.

'My, you 'aven't grown, 'ave you! Never saw anything like it. Not a boy no more. Your auntie won't 'ardly know you.'

But if they had altered Aunt Anne herself had remained most comfortably the same; stoutish, with twinkling eyes that missed very little, the same knob of hair inside two combs, almost the same black-and-grey jersey coat. As it was November she was not brandishing a hose when they arrived; instead, she was planting her bulbs. 'Daffodils, all different sorts, juſt to show I'm pleased to be home. Sort of thank-offering to the garden,' she told them.

Re-introductions and greetings over, Ralph went in to make his omelet, Judy and Meg to lay the table, their mother to have a look at the *Sunday Times*, while Karen stayed outside with Aunt Anne and helped with the laſt of the bulbs. There was ſtill a great deal of family news ſhe wanted to give and ſhe was ſure Aunt Anne muſt want to hear.

'Judy's ſeventeen and ſhe's five foot ſeven and a half and not ſtopped growing,' ſhe ſaid as ſhe prodded in the laſt of the Sir Watkins, 'and Meg's five foot ſeven and ſhe's in the hockey eleven and tennis ſix.' Karen was proud of her family and didn't mind who knew it. 'Lots of people think Judy is good-looking. Do you? She's going to be Rosalind in *As you like it*.'

'Yes, I do. I like the way ſhe ties up thoſe curls of hers. One thing is ſhe'll never coſt much for hair-dreſſing. And what about Meg?'

'Oh, Meg . . . D'you know what Bunny ſaid about Meg? She ſaid ſhe was an "influence."'

'My!' ſaid Aunt Anne, ſuitably.

‘And Benjie’s just the same as ever, isn’t he?’

Benjie, under the impression that they were burying bones for him to dig up later, was sitting beside them to watch. Hearing his name he rolled over on his back and put his four paws in the air, his long ears spread out flat with their pink linings showing.

‘Not quite,’ said Aunt Anne. ‘His figure is not improved. It is now rather like mine.’

‘Oh, *no*,’ cried Karen, horrified, and made Benjie run round the lawn till lunch-time to work off his fat and show how slim he really was.

With all these things to talk over and all the bulbs to finish off there was no time to mention music till lunch was over and washed up, and the family scattered to their various pursuits. Mrs Forrest was going out to tea; Judy was fetched in a car by the ‘girl in my form’ and her brother; Meg had a meeting of some kind. Ralph decided to go for an enormous walk with Benjie. He would come back, he said, make them another omelet for their supper, and then he and Karen would go home together.

At last they were alone and Aunt Anne slipped her arm through Karen’s.

‘Now, my dear, what will you play to me?’

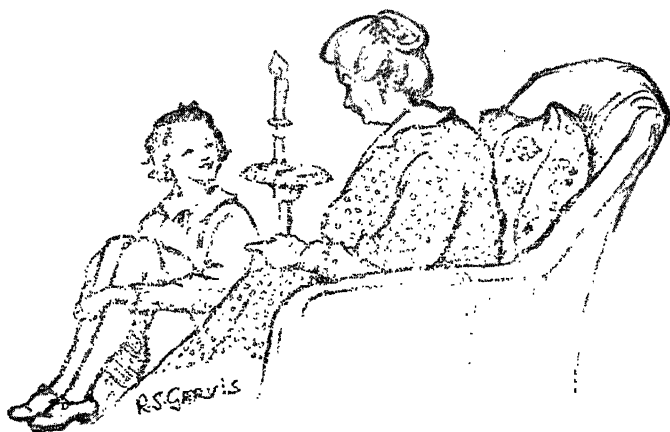
‘Oh, what won’t I? Everything I know.’

On she went through the short afternoon into the long evening. She broke off to fetch the tea and the copper kettle that sang a tune of its own on the hob; then to draw the blinds and stir the fire into flames. Aunt Anne lit the candle beside her chair and said she could see enough to knit if she wanted to do so; for the moment listening was enough, and candlelight was good for listening.

'Well, well, *well*! How I've enjoyed that!' she sighed happily when at last Karen left the piano and came to sit on a stool by the fire. 'Let's see, how long is it since you came downstairs that night and picked out *Drink to me only with thine Eyes* on my piano?'

'I was eight. Now I'm fourteen.'

'H'm.' Aunt Anne seemed to ponder. 'This Sonia



woman has done wonders for you. You've been learning from her ever since that festival, I suppose.'

That festival! It wasn't forgotten then.

Aunt Anne ruminated on.

'Very trying, that was. I was sorry for the woman with the double-barrelled name—what was it? A nice kind soul; if a poor musician.'

She was glad to hear that Rosalba and Karen had made friends again, that they were playing duets only the day before. Also that Rosalba adored Sonia.

'She went to America with her this last tour, looking after her and talking to all the people. She loved it. Rosalba really likes talking about music much more than playing.'

'Excellent,' said Aunt Anne, and nodded her head. Then she inquired briskly, 'And now we 've heard about every one else, what about yourself? How are you getting on?'

'I'm in the Remove. Judy says it 's the form where all the fools go.'

'And do you like the fools?'

'Yes. We're all odds and ends. There's a girl who 's going to be an artist, and one who 's had typhoid, and one who was brought up in Poland, and one whose father . . .'

Ralph returned and the conversation ended.

At supper, when they had finished his omelet and he was threatening to make them another, Aunt Anne produced the Bristol paper.

'Something caught my eye this morning,' she said. 'Ralph, are you aware of the fact that this sister of yours plays the piano?'

'Ought to be,' said Ralph, 'considering she's at it from morning till night.'

'I'm not,' said Karen, and added mournfully, 'I don't even get the three hours.'

'Well, I suggest she enters for this.' Aunt Anne tapped the paper. 'A gramophone company are giving a prize of ten pounds for the rendering of a particular piece of music, the winner to make a gramophone record.'

'How do you make a gramophone record?' asked Ralph, at once interested. 'I've always wanted to know the process.'

‘I’ve no idea. That’s not the point, however. The competition is going to take place at Bristol with a concert in the evening for the best seven candidates, and the audience are to vote for the winner.’

‘Vote? Vote for the winner? Let’s see,’ and Ralph took the paper.

‘But you don’t mean I could go in for that, do you?’ asked Karen.

‘I don’t see why not.’

‘But won’t fearfully good people go in? Does it say anything about age?’

‘Not a word,’ said Ralph. ‘You can be eighty if you like.’

‘What’s the piece?’

‘*Gold* by Leversej.’

‘Leversej? Never heard of him.’

Neither Karen nor Aunt Anne had heard of him and Aunt Anne disliked the title of the piece.

‘No music should have titles,’ she said severely; ‘at all events, no titles given by the composer. Friendly nicknames perhaps—’

‘Oh, I don’t know. I’d rather have *Gold* than just one of the ops. they all have,’ argued Ralph. ‘Op. fifteen. Op. five hundred and forty-two—’

‘Words,’ said Aunt Anne disdainfully. ‘Heavy, clumsy things tying the music down—’

‘Anyway, is there an entrance fee?’ asked Ralph, sticking to what he understood.

‘Half a crown, and I’ll pay it.’

Ralph flung down the paper.

‘That settles it. You’d better go in, Karen. It can’t hurt you. And if it’s a case of voting I’ll bring along one or two who’ll vote as I tell them.’

That was something. 'No marks at all . . .' that awful statement of a dreadful fact still echoed down the corridors of Karen's memory. 'No votes at all' might well be added to it—but not if Ralph brought along a few of his friends.

'All right, Ralph, if you promise to do that I'll go in for it.'

## CHAPTER XXIII

### A COLD IN THE HEAD

THE competition was not until January so there was plenty of time. Sonia was amused at the idea. The more Karen played in public at these small affairs—for small they seemed to her—the better.

‘It’s discipline if it’s nothing else. It’s good for you to have to play a certain piece on a certain date whether you feel like it or not. It’ll give you an idea what it means to be a public performer. If the lid of the piano falls on your head, still you go on playing. If you have a temperature of a hundred and two, still you go on playing—more than a hundred and two there are apt to be too many wrong notes. If the hall has seven people in it, all hissing you, still you go on playing. It’s as much a matter of endurance and courage as anything else.’

Then she went on to tell Karen about a famous pianist she knew who went somewhere into the country to play the E flat concerto of Liszt with the local orchestra.

‘He sat down to rehearse with them an hour or so before the concert and what did the orchestra do but start up the Saint-Saens concerto in C minor.’

‘The wrong one? But *why*?’

‘The wrong parts had been sent from London, that was why.’

‘But what did the poor man do? What *could* he do?’

‘Do? Played it, of course. Gave the best performance he could with all the courage he had. Emergencies



—it's like the stage, you're always dealing with emergencies. You can't fail your audience; on the contrary, you've got to get them afresh each time.'

'Get them? But how?'

Sonia shrugged her shoulders.

'Who's to know? Love your music, play it to them—and forget them.'

The *Leversej* was a queer, Karen thought beautiful, piece; a fluttering, brilliant thing with cascades of scales and sudden quiet passages full of curious chords.

'But why does he call it *Gold*?'

'Can't think. But it suits you. It's young. I believe you can play it though I couldn't to save my life.'

Karen walked home soberly after hearing that remark. What in the world did Sonia mean? Of course she could play anything, even the A flat polonaise of Chopin with the awful octaves in the left hand. Hardly any women could play that and Sonia often put it into her recital programmes. There was no piece written she couldn't play—as far as the notes were concerned. Notes, Karen was beginning to perceive, were by no means everything.

Aunt Anne thought it frankly hideous. How anybody could be found to listen to such a thing, let alone publish and play it, she could not imagine.

'If I'd thought you were going to waste your time making that horrible noise I never should have suggested the competition. You can't be playing the right notes.'

'I am. Really I am.'

'Well, all I can say is I can't see that it makes the slightest difference whether you are or not. How many people did you say were in for it?'

'Seventy.'

'Seventy people learning that frightful music! It's wicked.'

Karen had tried to stand up for Leversej, whoever he might be. She enjoyed playing *Gold*. 'Anyway, Sonia says it's good discipline, like an emergency.'

Aunt Anne gave a wry smile.

'If your Sonia looks upon this piece as an emergency, well and good, I've nothing more to say. It's just about what it is.'

The emergency that Karen had to face, however, when the chilly January day dawned, was not Leversej; it was nothing more nor less than an appalling cold in the head. She woke, sneezed seven times, her eyes streamed, her nose began to swell; she sneezed seven times more and then woke up Meg.

'Beg,' she called. 'Whad shall I do? I've got a dorful cold id by head.'

Meg, springing up to get into a jersey and shorts and do her daily dozen, told her she couldn't have a cold. It was the day of her competition.

But that was just it. She had.

'The common cold,' said Ralph, practising his future bedside manner, 'is more productive of illness than any other ailment in Great Britain, always excepting the toll of the roads——' But his mother told him it was no moment to be funny. 'Don't you worry, Karen, darling,' she said, 'we'll steam and soak and rub it out of you before to-night.'

The cold, however, was the kind that means to have a day to itself, a complete day of sneezing and coughing and blowing the nose with no time or attention for anything else. 'Oh, if *odly* id could have waited for to-borrow,' wailed Karen, a bath-towel over her head

while she inhaled eucalyptus from a jug of boiling water. 'I can't blay like this. I don't feel *busical*.'

'I'm sure you don't feel musical, darling,' said her mother, all sympathy. 'You don't feel anything. How could you? Would you like to give it up?'

Karen shook her head, Sonia was away—a concert at Amsterdam; she would never face her again if she had to say she had refused to play because of a cold in the head. 'Very good experience for you,' Sonia would say, and not be sympathetic in the least. She must think of the audience, too. Both Judy and Ralph were bringing parties of friends; and the whole of her form, the despised Remove, were to be there. She couldn't back out.

'Do, I'll blay,' she said dismally, and retired under her bath-towel.

There were seventy entrants for the prize, and the eliminating heats had luckily taken place the day before. Karen had got through that all right and been one of the seven chosen to play at the evening concert before an audience. On that occasion the entrants were to play not only the Leversj but two pieces of their own choice, one before and one after it. 'Very wise,' Sonia had said to that. 'A good test of taste. If that piece is to come off at all it must have the right setting.' Karen had chosen for herself. She had decided, after much thought, on Debussy's *Clair de Lune* before and *The Bee's Wedding* after. She liked the Leversj. It was fun, but it seemed to want something quiet and beautiful, like moonlight, before it to give the feeling of surprise it needed. Sonia had said it was an astonishing sort of piece, meant to shock an audience into listening. Then *The Bee's Wedding* was old-fashioned and cheerful and busy and gay—easy to hear; it would send them

away happy. 'I see,' said Sonia, and approved. She liked you to make your mind up for yourself, did Sonia.

Now, however, the thought of plunging into the cool moonlight of the Debussy was dreadful—it only made her sneeze anew.

Biddy poked her head through the door. Mr Derry James had dropped in to say he and his wife would be there to-night, and he was sorry Karen had a cold.

'Then they're back from their honeymoon, are they?' said Mrs Forrest.

'They are that,' said Biddy. 'But he didn't give me

a word about anything, only the music. And the old dirge from the parish hall has been round to know the time of it.'

'Hebsey?' Karen lifted a corner of the towel. 'Is darling Hebsey cobig?'

'She is. And will ye mind how ye won them scales with her beside ye, she says. I don't like a bone in her body, that woman,' and Biddy banged the door.

'All your supporters,' said Mrs Forrest. 'I believe Aunt Anne is bringing Mrs Bent.'

'Oh, and I do feel so *ud-busical*,' groaned Karen, and retired again under her towel to sniff harder than ever.

Under the warm, damp roof of it she reflected that her hero, Wolfgang Mozart, aged eight or nine, must have



felt unmusical, too, sometimes during those tours of daily concerts begun at the age of seven. He must have had a pain sometimes, or at all events felt cross and inclined to go on playing with his soldiers or whatever he was doing. But did he play with such a stupefying thing as a cold in the head? Did any one? Did Miriam Hals? Sonia would say most certainly they did, that they gave you your music however they felt. 'Oh, *dear*,' moaned Karen.

She decided to ask Meg to come to the green room with her. Meg was so sensible. Biddy had let down her summer frock of green silk; it was a nice comfortable dress with short sleeves, and at half-past six she got up and sneezed her way into it. Ralph brought her six of his largest handkerchiefs and a silk one to take on to the platform in case she had to blow her nose between the pieces.

'You won't, though,' prophesied Judy. 'You'll be too thrilled. But you'd better try to look as nice as you can, all the same, hadn't you?' and she produced a pot of cold cream for her nose, rapidly growing sore and scarlet, and a large powder puff. That she gave into Meg's hands saying it was loaded, and all she had to do was to give her a good dust over last thing before she went on.

'I've got tons of people coming,' she finished cheerfully. 'You remember the girl in my form who you took off saving the goal, she's coming and bringing two brothers who are frightfully good at catcalls and that kind of thing. They say they're going to get two voting papers each somehow. Don't you worry. Just play and we do the rest.'

'Oh, thank you,' said Karen, feebly, and wondered

what would happen if the other six candidates brought their friends' brothers too. Still, it should make her safe from: 'No votes at all—this entrant got no votes at all'—a horrid phrase that still echoed in her memory. All the same, it wasn't the way to do it. Aunt Anne had said crisply: 'I shall, of course, vote for the player I consider best, irrespective of any personal interest.' And Karen had said: 'Yes, Aunt Anne, of course you will.'

Remembering this, she pulled herself together and said: 'But you know, Judy, you must vote for the best one, not just me. Aunt Anne's going to. You must tell your friends that.'

'Bunk. They won't see any difference, anyhow—unless you stop or howl or leave off in the middle or something. They'll know what they've come for, all right.' And with a huge wink Judy whisked out of the room.

Karen found Meg a great help. Biddy provided a cup of hot black-currant tea, with more of it warming for the invalid's return; Mrs Forrest provided a taxi, and Meg saw to it that she drank one and got into the other, with Rosalba's fur gloves (the ones she had worn at the Women's Institute) on her hands and Judy's newest and gayest scarf round her neck.

The seven performers were together in a little room beside the platform. Swing-doors with glass panels led into it from the corridor, and out of it on to the brilliant pool of light which was the platform, where, under a sheltering palm, the grand piano stood, its black lid yawning open, ready.

'It looks like a monster with its mouth open waiting to devour you all,' whispered Meg, stirred to this

unwonted flight of fancy by the solemn occasion. Karen, however, had played on the monster the day before at the preliminary trials. 'It's heavedly, it's a dreab of a piado,' she whispered back, shaking her head violently, and sneezed six times into Ralph's second handkerchief.

'She's got a cold, hasn't she?' inquired the young man from the gramophone company who was looking after them all, a cheerful, sunny young man who felt he knew how to manage artistes in green rooms.

'Fearful, but she's quite well,' said Meg, firmly.

'Okay,' said the gramophone man. 'But we'll put her behind the door, shall we, where she won't sneeze quite so much. You know what people are.'

He pushed a chair into a distant corner and Karen sat down. Every time the door opened, and that was very often, a blast of cold air rushed in and gave her what seemed to be a fresh cold. Had any one ever sneezed so often, she wondered, and Meg said she was sure it was a record.

'I believe when the place gets really hot you'll stop,' she added hopefully. 'That's what Ralph said, anyway.' Already Ralph's lightest word on medical matters carried great weight, so Karen just nodded her head and said perhaps so, but it wasn't anything like hot yet, was it?

'No,' said Meg, 'it's icy, and I've never felt anything like the draughts—but here's the gramophone man.'

He was wandering gaily about handing round his hat which held the numbers of the order in which they were to play. As soon as they had performed they were to go to the other green room on the other side of the stage.

'That's something,' said Meg. 'If you get in early we'll clear out of here, anyway. I'll draw for you. Here's luck.'

She drew the number for Karen, whose eyes at the moment were streaming so that she could hardly see the gramophone man, let alone his hat.

'Number seven. Last. Er—well . . .' Meg refused to be dashed. 'A jolly good place, I should say. They won't have time to forget you. Who's going to vote for someone they'd heard an hour ago?'

'Sorry about that, with her cold and all,' said the gramophone man. 'But someone's got to be last. You settle her down and she can listen to the others and enjoy herself.'

A dark woman in spectacles began. 'I'm ever so nervous,' she said. 'I don't like beginning.' But the gramophone man only looked at his watch, said '*Now*,' pulled open the swing-doors and in she went. She played a jig by Scarlatti before the Leversej, and a noisy, forcible modern thing after it. 'All too bright, too glittery,' thought Karen drowsily, and started on her next handkerchief.

After her came a serious young man who had already told Meg he intended to be an organist and that he did not care for the piano as an instrument. He started with an immensely long piece, a sonata, that Karen did not know. No one else knew it either. 'What is it he's playing?' they whispered to each other, and another young man with hair brushed off his forehead into stiff waves said sardonically: 'A little thing of me own, I fancy.'

The gramophone man looked at his watch and muttered, 'Oh, give over, do. Get on with it, can't you,' when suddenly the corridor doors opened and in walked the singer, followed by his mousey accompanist in a trailing black dress and gold-rimmed spectacles.



He was a cheery bass-baritone who was to relieve the monotony of the evening by singing two groups of robust and good-tempered songs.

He burst in, bringing his blast of icy air, and was greeted by a perfect salvo of sneezes from Karen. Meg, who counted them, found she had beaten the family record with nine running.

'Heavens! That girl's got a cold,' said the singer, looking at her with horror. 'The father and mother of a cold. I catch 'em in a moment. Lose me voice for weeks.'

'Don't go near her. Don't risk it,' urged the accompanist, hastily sorting music on the table. 'You must take care of that wonderful voice.'

'Hay fever,' whispered the gramophone man. 'Subject to it.'

'Hay——' the singer began, 'Hay nothing——'; then he had to go on. The clapping, which was short after what sounded like a funeral march as the serious young man's last item, died quickly away and he was getting ready his platform manner, his smile, his easy nonchalant walk. He cast one more angry look at Karen, 'Hay——' he said again bitterly, the gramophone man threw the doors open, and, dogged by his faithful accompanist, he was gone, never to reappear. 'I wonder if I'd ever make an accompanist,' thought Karen, and feared she would not. Benjie, however, would make a perfect one.

The party round them slowly dwindled. 'It's like going out to the guillotine in *The Only Way*,' whispered Meg. 'D'you remember? Someone shouts "Number forty-four," or something like that, and a "brrrr" goes up from the crowd waiting to see them, and away they go for ever.'

'But it's not,' Karen tried to say—she was not going to have her lovely piano likened to a guillotine—then 'Number five' called the gramophone man, cosily, in rather a special kind of voice, and the girl of eleven or so in the corner was unwound from her shawls. She was a pretty little thing in a black velvet dress, a large bow holding together her bunch of black corkscrew curls. Someone with her, who might have been her mother, was combing the curls round her finger till the moment she shot through the doors.

'Meg, was I like that once?' asked Karen in a hoarse whisper, remembering the festival, when she had worn a velvet dress, and Girlie Kay.

'No fear,' said Meg stoutly. 'She had eyes like currants in a bun.'

The child was greeted with loud and long applause. Sure to win the ten pounds, said Karen to herself. Ivy's dad would call her 'Baby Curls' and make a lot of her. She played a first piece woven out of nursery rhymes, and finished with an arrangement of Christmas carols. The Leversej in the middle of such music sounded quite unlike itself. She took it slowly for one thing, and, Karen noticed, kept forgetting what the left hand was playing. 'That left hand doesn't know what it's doing,' Aunt Anne would have said severely. The applause, however, was thunderous, and Karen thought she heard the catcalls intended for her. Or perhaps Baby Curls had her own party at the back of the hall—she didn't care. She was beginning to think herself into the Debussy. Soon she would be in there, playing that lovely piano, getting away into the moonlight; away from the hall and the people and her hateful cold. She went over it in her mind. How beautiful it was! So

still and cool and far away. '*Slowly, slowly, now the moon Walks the night in her silver shoon. . .*' Love your music, play it . . . and forget your audience—that was what Sonia had said and that was what she would do.

They were alone. The sixth candidate, a nice big girl who had been very sympathetic over the cold, was on the platform playing, and had reached her last piece.

'In a moment now,' whispered Meg, and, like a good second at a boxing match, began to get her ready. She gave her a clean handkerchief for a last blow at her nose; then a sniff at the inhaler that kept off the sneezes for a little; then Ralph's clean silk handkerchief to take with her; then a good flouting with Judy's powder. She took her coat and Rosalba's fur gloves and gave her hands a good rubbing with her own that were always warm. '*Now,*' said the gramophone man, and with a stern '*Wake up!*' she pushed her through the swing-door on to the platform. . . .

'There was poetry in that, real poetry,' said a woman behind Aunt Anne when Karen finished *Clair de Lune*.

Aunt Anne turned round to beam and say, 'Yes. Most refreshing,' and cock an ear for the next comment. This is a musical woman, she thought, I must remember what she says.

'Clever. Very clever. It's an amusing piece, after all. I think I'll get it,' said the musical woman after the *Leversej*. Aunt Anne refrained from any comment. The child actually played the horrible thing as if she enjoyed it. All I can suppose, said Aunt Anne to herself, is that I'm getting old.

The applause was loud, exceedingly loud—as loud, almost, as for that odious little thing who had simpered through the nursery rhymes. After a moment Karen stood up and made them rather a shy bow; then sat down and started her *Bee's Wedding*.

'Delicious,' said the musical woman. 'Just what I want to hear after it.' When it was done she added in a clear decided voice that cut through the clapping: 'This is the one for me, whoever she is. She has personality.'

'Good,' thought Aunt Anne, 'that's a musical woman and there's one outside vote, anyway. I must remember to tell Karen.'

Voting papers were rustling all round the hall. She took hers and with a clear conscience made a large cross opposite the name 'Miss Karen Forrest.' There was no question about it. The child had played like a little artist, and she had that rare and personal thing, a lovely touch. Was that what the musical woman meant when, in the new jargon, she called it personality?

Karen was gone. With Ralph's silk handkerchief in her hand she had smiled and bowed at the applause, then sneezed five times and bolted back to Meg.

'Well done you,' said Meg, in her encouraging way. 'Sneeze as much as you like now. Jolly good the way you kept them off. I was waiting, expecting you to burst any minute.'

Karen was into her coat and scarf and gloves in one minute, her mind filled with the thought of Biddy's black-currant tea waiting for her.

'What do you want to do?' asked Meg.

'Go hobe,' said Karen. The colder air of the green room had set her eyes streaming again.

A scrawny young man poked a head at the end of a long neck round the corridor door.

‘Miss Karen Forrest?’

‘That’s her,’ said Meg.

He leapt into the room, a writing-pad in his hand.

‘Are you a native of Bristol? How old are you? Where were you trained? Have you played the piano since you were a tiny tot? Do you like——’

Karen looked at him stupidly, and sneezed.

‘Do you love your music? A schoolgirl—are you a schoolgirl, by the way? Are you fond of——’

Now the door on to the platform opened and the gramophone young man sprang in.

‘Oh, there you are!’ he cried. ‘I’ve been hunting everywhere for you. You ought to be on the other side.’

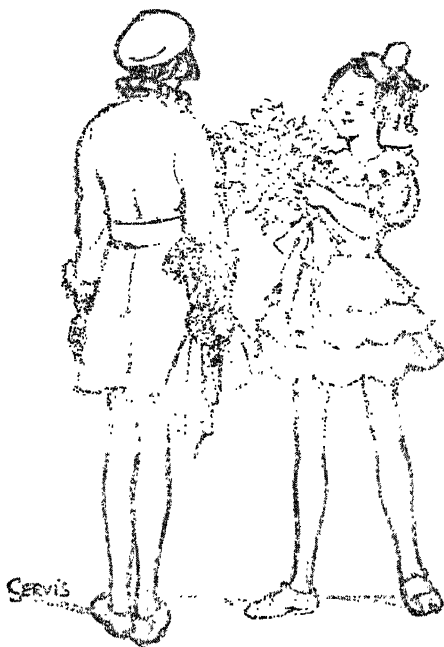
‘Why?’ asked Meg in her bland voice.

‘Oh, every one is,’ the young man told her irritably. ‘Your name’s just going to be announced. Come and take a call.’ And he seized Karen’s hand.

‘What!’ cried Meg. ‘Has she won?’

‘Of course she has. Easy.’

Applause, catcalls, cheers came through the door.



'There! Hear that?' said the young man. 'They've been given your name. Go on. Take your coat off, won't you?'

'No,' said Meg. 'She can't take anything off. She's got a cold.'

So Karen, in her school coat and Judy's scarf and Rosalba's fur gloves, stood on the platform holding the young man's hand because she forgot to let it go. She had won the competition by a large majority of votes, and he had, he said, much pleasure in presenting her, on behalf of his company, with a cheque for ten pounds. The record would be on sale by the spring and he felt sure every one there would wish to possess it. The child she called Baby Curls then marched on and presented a bunch of roses, getting a beam of the limelight after all.

'Oh, thank you,' said Karen, and sneezed.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### A RECORD AND AN IDEA

THE idea of a scholarship came in the first instance from Derry. He and Ralph were looking over Karen's press notices a week or so after the competition.

'They're pretty good, these,' said Derry. 'Some of them are written by people who understand what they are talking about, and they all think Karen a bit out of the way. She is. What are you going to do about her?'

'Do?' said Ralph. 'Ought we to do anything?'

'You ought to give her all the chance you can. She's worth it.'

Ralph was impressed. He asked what Derry suggested.

'Well, what about a scholarship to begin with? In one of the big London schools.'

'London! You don't think she's up to that, do you?'

Ralph was astonished at the idea. He turned it over in his mind for a week before he broached the subject to his mother.

One evening, when the others had all gone to bed, he began: 'I say, I've been thinking about Karen. D'you know Derry thinks her pretty hot stuff at the piano.'

'I should hope so. So she is,' said Mrs Forrest, her attention on the stocking she was darning.

'Well, what's the idea for her future?'

The stocking was put down.

‘Yes, let’s think and talk. It’s time we made some more plans. We’ve got this house for another year, then the seven years’ lease is up. Judy has had a marvellous invitation to India from that fairy godmother of hers—a year there, all expenses paid, clothes and all. I think she’d better accept it, don’t you?’

Ralph pondered.

‘She’s got the certificate and she’ll get her matric. all right with any luck this summer. No reason why she shouldn’t have a bust before taking a job. I couldn’t, but it’s different for a girl.’

‘Then she’ll go out in September. If Meg can ever scrape through her exam. I’ll manage the Physical Training College for her. She’s always wanted to go there.’

‘That’s Meg, then. And I’ll be finishing here at the same time—in a year. Leaves Karen.’

‘Yes. Karen will be fifteen.’

‘Derry says what about her trying for a scholarship, a music scholarship.’

Mrs Forrest opened her eyes wide at that.

‘But does he think her good enough?’

‘He seems to.’

‘Would she like it, d’ you think?’

‘Don’t know. I’ll have a crack with her about it, shall I, when we go up to London to make that gramophone record.’

Ralph from the very beginning had wanted to know how gramophone records were made and to see them making one. With a little manœuvring, therefore, they had managed to postpone Karen’s visit to the London works where she was to make her record of the Leversej till half-term, when he could get off and go up with her



for the day. The gramophone company paid her expenses and those of her escort. Ralph approved of that.

‘Nothing minging about them, I’ll say that,’ he said. ‘And I tell you what, if they give us lunch I’ll stand you tea and ices.’

Karen, one of the ten pounds tucked away in her newest purse, said that she meant to do a great deal of shopping in London. She meant to bring back something for Hemsey, Rosalba, Sonia, Aunt Anne, and Derry—all the people who had helped her with her music—a sort of thank offering to them.

But the day when it came didn’t work out like that.

They reached Paddington and drove off in a taxi through miles of streets to the studio, an old, countrified house that had once stood among the apple-trees of its walled garden. Now it crouched, grey, square, rather worn, with enormous tall studios, like limpets, growing out of its back.

‘We’re much too early,’ said Karen nervously, when they got there. ‘Hadn’t we better walk up and down outside?’ She remembered Rosalba’s audition and their march round the square. You had to be careful.

Ralph said if she thought he had used up his half-term to come to London and look at the outside of a house she was jolly well mistaken. He leapt up the steps and disappeared.

When he came out again it was with a pleasant middle-aged person in a grey suit and spectacles. They were early for Miss Forrest’s appointment, he said, but if they liked to come into one of the studios and watch a bit they could.

Treading carefully at their heels Karen found herself in a huge, very lofty room, square and biscuit coloured

like a giant's bandbox. The ceiling was hung with butter-muslin; the walls were covered with squares of what looked like cardboard. A rehearsal was going on. A small orchestra, mostly in shirt-sleeves, was playing; a man with a great rolling voice was singing; all of them were being coaxed, bullied, persuaded, roared at, drilled,



by a little slip of a yellowish young man with a hooky nose.

'He 's getting a move on,' said Ralph, much amused. 'He makes 'em get down to it, doesn't he!'

'S—sh. It 's the conductor,' whispered Karen, remembering that conductors had to be treated with awe.

'Funny little squirt, but he knows his job, I should say,' said Ralph, indulgently.

'But they 're not making a record, are they?' whispered Karen.

'They will be in a moment,' said their friend.

It all looked very casual, Karen thought. A white smooth-haired terrier was strolling about sniffing at every one's legs. 'Fasten him up to a tym., someone,' cried the conductor, and whipped his forces once again to the attack.

'They 're working. My aunt, they 're *working*,' exclaimed Ralph, quite astonished; and Karen said as severely as she could that of course they were working. People did work at music.

Suddenly a red light and a '2' showed. Silence fell, as suddenly as a dropped curtain.

'That means they 're using another studio in the building and they mustn't be disturbed,' said Ralph, wise as an owl.

How did he know? How did Ralph always manage to find out things? The tall things on tripods were the 'mikes'; two of them, he explained. Did Karen see the wires that ran from them into the recording room, the little place the other side of that glass window? They took a record in there and then played it back to see what was wrong. Then they made another and kept it.

'Play it back? Is that what they do for me?' She had no idea what he meant.

'Come on, we go in here now.'

They followed their friend into the little recording room, where another, extremely serious-looking, man was manipulating knobs in a row in front of him, like the dashboard of a car. Through the glass window they watched their orchestra and their singer working away together for the last time. The conductor nodded and they were ready. A brown disc of what looked like toffee began to turn; the recording room was flooded

with sound; the serious man attended delicately to his knobs.

‘But are they *making* it?’ breathed Karen.

‘You can talk as loud as you like in here, it doesn’t affect it,’ said their friend. ‘We’ll play this back to them in a moment and then you’ll see.’

The toffee went round and round and finished. By some miracle the song was written on it. Then Karen saw what they meant by playing it back. The orchestra sat with their heads in their hands, listening, while their own performance was played to them. ‘Just that once,’ said Ralph. ‘After that it’s no good. It’s done with. They shave off the wax.’

‘Oh, what waste——’ began Karen, but the conductor sprang to his feet on the last note with a violent ‘Won’t do!’ and they plunged headlong into another rehearsal.

‘Can’t I go somewhere and try the piano,’ murmured Karen. What was she going to do if someone sprang up and shouted ‘Won’t do!’ at the end of her playing back? ‘What happens if I play wrong?’

‘You make another,’ said their friend, and seemed amused at the idea. Anyhow, he told her a committee sat on all the records, listened most carefully, and passed them as good enough. She needn’t be afraid. It would be a little time yet before a studio was free for her. What about some lunch?

It was over lunch that Ralph made his soul-shaking remark.

‘Are we anywhere near the London Music Institute?’ he inquired of their friend.

‘Not very. Why?’

Then he came out with it.

‘My sister’s thinking of trying for a scholarship there.’

‘What, to-day?’

‘No, not to-day, actually. But I thought we might go and have a look. Go over the ground, you know.’

The man, used to strangers to London, took out pencil and paper, made a rough map, wrote down names and bus numbers, and handed it across. Karen, seeing it, was too astonished to ask Ralph what on earth he meant. ‘It’s there, beside the Albert Hall,’ said the man.

She made her record (there was an absence of fuss that made it less of an event than a music lesson) and soon found herself in a bus roaring through the traffic, Ralph beside her.

‘We think it might be rather a good egg, if you really are keen on the piano idea,’ was all he had to say.

‘Of course I’m keen,’ said Karen. Playing on that beautiful piano alone in that curious muslin-hung room had been heavenly. Never had her tone sounded so good. ‘Naturally,’ the man had said afterwards. ‘Naturally it sounded good. The place is acoustically perfect.’ She would have liked to go on playing there for hours.

They got out at a huge place called the Albert Hall. Ralph said it was supposed to look like gas-works, though he couldn’t see that it did. They went down immense flights of steps and reached the front of a large red-brick building. Out of it buzzed distant sounds of violins, pianos, voices, flying like winged things out of every window.

‘My aunt!’ said Ralph, ‘that’s it all right. Did you ever hear such a row?’

To Karen it was like listening at the gates of heaven. She could almost see the music curling up like blue smoke from a wood fire.

‘Well, now, make up your mind. If you can get there do you want to?’ asked Ralph, and she nodded her head. Did ever a saint want to go to heaven as she wanted to enter that place?

‘Right,’ said Ralph, and he shot up its steps as he had shot up the steps of the gramophone company. Doors to Ralph were merely things to open and enter by; to Karen when shut they were things to leave alone.

Presently he emerged holding a paper in his hand.

‘They’ve given me this—the book of words. Come on, we’ll read it while you have your ice. It’s in May.’

Karen’s heart nearly stood still.

‘In May? But I can’t. That’s next month. I can’t possibly——’

‘All right,’ said Ralph, and grinned. ‘Keep your hair on. You’ve got to be fifteen.’

Karen read the paper all the way home. When they reached Bristol she thought she knew it pretty well by heart. But the rest of the family found all sorts of new readings in it.

‘You pay up a guinea if you get to the finals,’ said Judy. ‘I call that a good deal. And I see you have to sing.’

That threw Karen into a twitter.

‘Sing? Who said I had to sing? I can’t sing.’

“*Candidates may,*” read Judy, “*at the discretion of the examiners, be asked to sing.*” Examiners are indiscreet, I’m sure.’

‘Discreet . . . indiscreet. I’ll ask Derry.’ The bewildered Karen comforted herself with that. Judy was being funny. Derry knew all about scholarships. He had had one in Manchester himself.

Then Meg took the paper.

'Now here *is* something. You'll have to pull up your socks about this. "*Candidates of small executive powers or whose health is delicate will certainly have no chance of success.*" There! I don't know about the executive powers but I do think Karen's much too small. I've always said so. The quicker I make you out a table of exercises and you get off on them, Karen, the better.'

Aunt Anne, who was having supper with them, as usual spoke the last and most sensible word.

'They want someone musical for their scholarships, my dear. You are musical.'

## CHAPTER XXV

### SHE SHALL HAVE MUSIC WHEREVER SHE GOES

It was Biddy who saw Karen off to London, who got her the ticket and put her into the train—Biddy supported by Benjie. Her mother had intended to go up with her, they were to stay the night in a little hotel in Kensington, but when the day came she was down with sudden influenza.

‘Oh, dear, I don’t like your doing all this alone, darling,’ she murmured, her eyes shut. ‘But what can I do? Neither Ralph nor Meg can get away . . .’ and Karen had to soothe her with a reminder that she was now fifteen and well able to take care of herself.

‘You’re very young but it can’t be helped,’ was all her mother would say. ‘Don’t be too worried over the scholarship. We none of us expect you to get it. And now I think I’ll try to sleep.’

So she went to sleep and Karen and Biddy and Benjie went off together, Karen carrying her music, Biddy with the suit-case Judy had left behind when she went to India, Benjie carrying nothing but his own fat self.

The train was full but Karen squashed herself in and waited while Biddy went off and bought the ticket. She came down the platform, Benjie on a lead, the change in her hand, striding along with the loose springy walk that made every one stare. Aunt Anne always said to watch Biddy walk was to see the heather under her feet.



'Ye'll get goin' and comin' with the one ticket,' she cried in her deep Donegal voice. 'And ye'll not be after losin' it, alanna, or it'll all be to pay again. Ye're to be in yer bed by half after eight. And if ye're hearin' the lig-lag of people behind ye, and they walkin' the streets of London, ye'll not stop for them. And wash a bit of flannel before ye get playin' to the gentlemen in the exam. I've put it in—a wee bit——'

The train snorted and jerked. Biddy cocked her red hat over one eye and came out with her grandfather's good-bye, the last remark he had always shouted after her when she was Karen's age: 'Good luck to ye and me seven thousand blessings on ye, and may ye never be sick nor sore till I see ye again.'

'Good-bye, good-bye. I'll be back to-morrow,' cried Karen and slid away from her.

Biddy's hat was red because she had been over to Ireland again that summer, this time to return with something beside a new hat—the news that she and McGuire, who still kept the store, were to get married as soon as ever the Forrest family gave up their house.

'Ye'll be scattered and gone,' she told Mrs Forrest when she broke the news, 'and him and me have bin courtin' since the day I left seven years ago with the green hat on me head!'

That was in September. Judy had gone and had become nothing but a weekly letter full of dances and picnics and the joys and terrors of learning to ride. Meg was plodding away at her certificate, she was to try for it in July. Ralph, in his last term, was head of the school, captain of the cricket eleven, and everything else glorious that it was possible to be. Karen herself

had had her fifteenth birthday, had filled up the scholarship form, and here she was—off to try her luck with the London Institute of Music.

She had never stayed anywhere alone before. On the other hand she had been to London twice and, thanks to Ralph, she knew the look of the red-brick Institute where she was to play. She couldn't possibly lose her way. She took a taxi from Paddington and arrived at the boarding-house just in time to sit by herself at a small table and eat a three-course dinner as if she was quite used to such a thing. Then, as she had promised she would, she went up to one of the twin beds in the room her mother had engaged for them both, taking with her three copies of *Punch* that she found in the dark little hall of the house. She read them all through and fell asleep.

She was due at half-past eleven next day. The hour between nine o'clock breakfast and the moment when she could start on the ten minutes' walk to the Institute seemed eternal. The hotel proprietress, a thin worried woman with large eyes, rushed up to her and said: 'All right, are you? Wretched thing, influenza,' and rushed off again. Otherwise no one spoke to her. At half-past ten she went upstairs to make up her mind what music to take with her.

Sonia, before she had started off for Vienna a fortnight before, had suggested *Clair de Lune* and the Leversaj, with the *Pathétique* sonata. 'They may not know the Leversaj,' she said, 'and that's always something—they can't be sick of it and they may be interested. But they'll ask for what they want. Take some Bach and some Chopin, and be ready for anything.'

Rosalba, who was going to Vienna too—she was part of Sonia's baggage, she now said—had produced a new pair of fur gloves. 'These will keep your hands warm even if your heart is cold,' she said, and Sonia had crushed her with: 'Rubbish, Rosalba. Karen's heart is perfectly warm. Don't put ideas into her head. She enjoys playing to people.'

She put on the gloves and sorted out a little pile of music. She intended to play by heart, but she thought it looked more business-like, perhaps, to have it there in the blue case with 'Karen' written across it. The case, rather worn now, always reminded her of the festival. This time there would be no speeches, thank goodness. You just played, and they liked it or didn't like it, as the case might be, and you went home. That was what Derry had told her. Quite a simple affair.

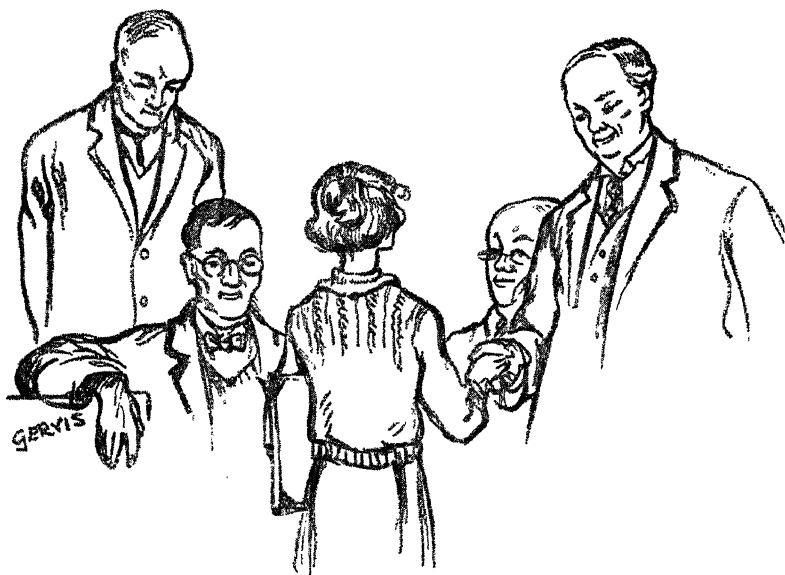
In the end she lost her way and was very nearly late; she had hardly time to glance at the other candidates before she was sent for. There seemed to be a good many of them. Karen looked respectfully at them and remembered that they had all survived the preliminaries, the kind of exam. she had had at Bristol before she had been allowed to come up to London. Only two or three were sent up from each centre and there were a great many centres. Out of them all there must be some fearfully good ones, people who could play anything, almost like Sonia. You had a card given to you, one of them, a big, fair girl, told her, if the examiners wanted to hear you play again. That meant you still had a chance. She herself had had two cards last year. She had played three times and been proxime.

'Proxime? What's that?' asked Karen.

'Runner-up. Just missed it,' said the girl. 'And I probably will again. I can't transpose for nuts, and that's the kind of thing they love. Can you?'

'Just a bit.'

Karen felt thankful to Derry, who had made her practise that and every kind of ear test. 'You've got



an ear,' he had said. 'You make the very most of it. Do all your tricks for all you're worth.'

It was an ordinary enough room, with nothing much in it but a couple of big pianos and the four chairs on which the four judges were sitting. One was a tall, thin, oldish man who walked about all the time she was playing with a restless, springy step that reminded Karen of Biddy. One was fat and bald; he sat very still and hardly spoke. Then there was a young man

in horn-rimmed spectacles and a nice fat genial one who shook hands and said 'Miss Karen Forrest' when she came in, and 'Now then, what are you going to play to us?' He was what Biddy would call a jolly four-bones of a man.

'Leversej? Who's Leversej?' they all said when Karen produced it. As Sonia had expected, they none of them knew it.

'But do you want to begin with the thing?' asked the thin man, looking through it disdainfully. He seemed to read it and make up his mind about it in one glance.

Karen said no, she would prefer to begin with *Clair de Lune*.

'Right. Is the seat the height you like?' said the genial man, and she began. After all, it said: 'Pieces of your own choice.' She liked the Leversej and she would make them like it. Even Aunt Anne had got used to it in the end.

It was very difficult to play. 'I don't like the way they're listening, I'm only getting the notes,' she said to herself unhappily. Sonia would say: 'Where's the music? Find it. Let them have it.' She finished the Debussy and plunged headlong into the Leversej. It went well. It pleased the young man with spectacles, and the fat man gave a grunt that might mean anything. Anyway, she began to forget them.

'Where did you find that?' asked the thin man. It was plain that he hadn't liked it in the least. Karen told him about the gramophone record, and he shrugged his shoulders and said it would take more than advertisement to make that kind of thing go.

After that they tried her with scales and arpeggios,

things that had no terrors for her. They gave her music to read which she managed pretty easily; then they heard four pages out of the sonata. 'Thank you,' said the young man, opened the door, and ushered her out.

She and the fair girl both had cards telling them to come again.

'I'm still in,' Karen had to whisper to the waitress at lunch because she had no one else to tell.

'After a job, are you?' said the waitress, but had no time to wait for an answer with all the people she had to attend to. There was curry, which Karen did not like, and stewed figs full of pips for a pudding, but she came flying back with a banana and an apple. 'Fruit's lucky,' she said, and whisked away.

At three o'clock Karen played a French suite of Bach and a Chopin waltz, and the thin man put a piece of music in front of her and asked her to transpose it, play it in a different key.

'May I play it as it is first?' she inquired, and he snapped out: 'Just as you like.'

It was a simple little tune in the key of F, easy to remember; she transposed it into the key of G without difficulty.

'Hm,' said the thin man. He sat down at the other piano and played a cadence, the 'Amen' that finishes the last prayer in church.

'Play that, please,' he said in a fierce voice, as if he meant: 'Play it if you dare.'

Karen played it. She had practised a good deal of that kind of thing with Aunt Anne. Aunt Anne played a chord or two and she guessed the notes.

She and the fair girl both had cards again; they were

to go back at five o'clock and meanwhile there was tea somewhere in the basement if they wanted it. There were four of them left in, the fair girl and herself, a boy of sixteen, and a tall dark girl.

'She won't get it,' said the fair girl. 'She can't transpose any more than I can though she's been practising it for months. The boy's good; I think fearfully good. He played the Schumann concerto at a concert in Manchester or somewhere, but he had a terrible style, they say.'

Karen was the last to go in. She listened outside the door and heard the fair girl playing the Bach Italian concerto and a piece of Rachmaninoff's. It sounded lovely. Then there was a long pause and she heard the piano again, very faint and hesitating. 'What are they making her do now?' thought Karen. She came out at last, flushed and rather shaken. 'That's done, thank Heaven,' she cried with relief. 'Never again.'

'Your Bach sounded wonderful——' began Karen, but there was no time to say more. She fled away down the passage and Karen had to go in. 'Anyway, I'll have played three times—that's something to tell the family,' she said to herself.

She sat at first with her back to the piano answering questions. Was she at school? Was she ever ill? What did her father do? Did she mean to make music her profession and work at it, really work at it? The young man in spectacles suddenly said: 'Let's see your hands.' She held them out and he looked at them as if he were a doctor. Luckily she had washed Biddy's bit of flannel again after lunch, and they were quite clean.

'You're small,' he said, discontentedly.

'Yes, but I'm growing,' cried Karen, and remembered

Meg. 'I do Keep Fit exercises. I'm strong—I'm getting fearfully strong.'

The bald man got up suddenly and said: 'I'll hear some Chopin. What have you got?'

Karen, glad to be back at the piano, played him a waltz.

Then the genial person who always remembered her name put music in manuscript before her.

'It 's a shame,' he said, 'but will you read that, please?'

It really was dreadful. The only thing that saved her was a book of sweetish old-fashioned songs copied out rather badly by someone years before, the ink faded to grey; that book was in the music cabinet in the drawing-room at Brent Hill, and for want of something better she had tried them all through. This manuscript was rather better written and therefore easier.

'Now transpose it,' said the thin man, as if saying: 'Now I've got you?'

'Let me play it once more through and I will,' said Karen bravely. And she did.

He tried her once more.

'Can you play us something, a tune, anything you like, out of your head, in any key I ask for?'

Karen swallowed.

'Yes,' she said.

*Drink.* She would play them *Drink*. *Drink* had helped her out of many a musical hole in the past. It had been the first tune she had picked out on Aunt Anne's piano. The Women's Institute had sung it and saved her from disgrace. It had made all sorts of useful patterns for the Vim, Vigour, Vitality classes. Ralph liked it. Once again she would pin her hopes to *Drink*.



'In B flat, then,' said the thin man, and she played it in B flat.

'Thank you,' he said, and suddenly he ceased to be a thin, dried-up old man trying to catch her out. He gave her a most friendly and charming smile. 'You have a very remarkable ear,' he said.

'And you can read,' said the man in spectacles, and he gave her a smile too.

Suddenly they were all smiling. The bald man got up from his chair.

'Well, Karen,' he said, as if he had known her for years. 'You can go and telephone to your friends at home. You've got your scholarship.'

Karen, trying to take it in, could only stammer: 'But we haven't got a telephone.'

'Telegraph then,' said the bald man, and laughed.

It was the end; the young man opened the door and discovered the fair girl was outside. She had evidently been listening.

'Proxime again, I'm afraid,' he said.

'Sickening!' cried the girl. 'But I'm not surprised. She can do anything, can't she? I said she'd get it.'

Karen said good-bye and walked away in a dream. In the telegraph office she decided to be extravagant and send three telegrams. 'I've got it. I've got it. I've got it.' One to her mother, who had said they none of them expected her to do anything of the kind. One to Hemsey, who would say she'd known it all along. And one to Aunt Anne, who would nod her head and say: 'I thought so. You are musical.'

'I am,' she said to herself, walking solemnly away to collect her bag and catch the train home. 'I think I must be musical.'

She looked at her hands, the fingers spread out, as she had looked at them that day when she had discovered Hemsey's piano. 'They 're mine,' she thought. 'They 'll make me music wherever I go. Like the rhyme: "She shall have music wherever she goes."' She couldn't resist a skip as she walked along, humming the rhyme to a little tune of her own.

*'Rings on her Fingers,  
Bells on her Toes,  
She shall have Music  
Wherever she goes.'*

